

ANCIENT INDIA—PART 2



Boat on the Ganges River

Unit Overview

About 1500 BCE, groups of nomads from central Asia crossed the mountains and settled on the Indian subcontinent. Some of these people called themselves Aryans, which meant *nobles* in their language. They would build a new civilization along the Ganges River and establish a culture that continues to impact life in the Eastern Hemisphere today. Let's see how it all happened.

The Arrival of the Aryans

In the years following the collapse of the Harappan civilization, a group of people called **Aryans** arrived on the Indian subcontinent. Historians tell us that they were not a separate race. The Aryans were part of a larger group, known as **Indo-Europeans**, a

people who originated in central Asia. Beginning around 2000 BCE, some Indo-Europeans migrated to Europe. Others, such as the Aryans, moved south through mountain passes in the Hindu Kush and Himalayan Mountains. They arrived in the **Indus Valley** about 1500 BCE. During the next five hundred years, they built a civilization that, with the exception of the southern tip of India, extended over all of the subcontinent.

The Aryans made their way onto the Indian subcontinent through mountain passes like the one pictured here.



In many ways, the Aryans were very different from the people already living on the Indian subcontinent. They were **nomads** without permanent homes and were not farmers who remained in one place. Although their herds constantly required land for grazing, they provided meat, cheese, butter and milk. Families measured their wealth by then number of cows that they owned. The Aryans also rode horses and drove wooden chariots. They loved eating, drinking, playing games with dice and racing horses.

From Nomads to Farmers

Over time, the Aryans mingled with the native people, who were called **Dravidians**. They stopped being nomads and became farmers. The same technology that they had used to make iron tips for arrows soon produced better tools. The invention of the iron plow and the production of heavier, sharper iron axes enabled the Aryans to clear the

dense rainforests of the Ganges Valley. They built canals for irrigation and pools for storing water. Nonetheless, transforming the jungle into farmland was a dangerous project. Workers battled tigers, lions, elephants and other animals whose habitats were being destroyed. Poisonous snakes were also a serious threat. In spite of these problems, farms along the banks of the Ganges River were soon yielding large harvests of wheat, barley and millet.

The Ganges River begins in the mountains and flows east into the Bay of Bengal.



The Aryans also brought their religious beliefs with them. Their polytheistic faith included a large number of gods and goddesses, such **Indra** (the god of war), **Varuna** (the god of creation) and **Agni** (the god of fire). Rituals, ceremonies and prayers were very important. If they were carried out properly, people believed that the gods were likely to grant health, wealth and success in battle to their worshippers. Because the Aryans had no written language when they first came to India, priests memorized long hymns and prayers. They recited them in an early form of **Sanskrit**, their spoken language.

By 500 BCE, the Indian people developed a written language. For the first time, priests wrote down the sacred prayers and hymns. This collection of religious writings and teachings is called the **Vedas**. The *Vedas* have provided us with valuable

information about life in ancient India. They also became the basis for the **Hindu** faith, which is the world's third largest religion today. The *Vedas* were so influential that historians sometimes refer to this period of Indian history as the **Vedic Age**. Click on the graphic below to learn more about the Vedic Age.



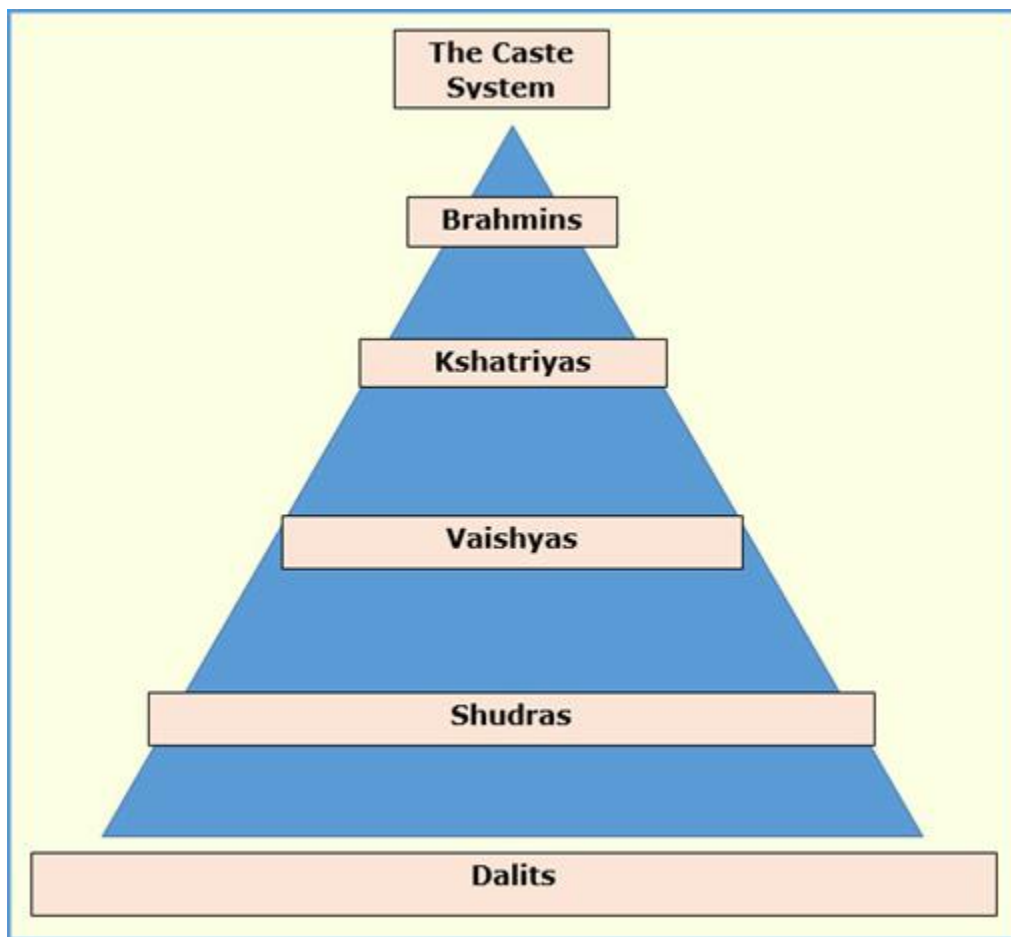
For a long time, the Aryans and the Dravidians did not have a large kingdom with a single ruler. Instead, tribes, whose leaders were called **rajahs**, fought to control trade and territory. Eventually, some rajahs became powerful rulers and built walled cities in the Ganges Valley. Around 300 BCE, **Chandragupta** put together a massive army consisting of over 700,000 soldiers and 9,000 elephants. He conquered one group after another until he formed an empire that included almost all of the subcontinent.

The Caste System

The *Vedas* include a story that explains how the gods created four distinct groups of people. This became the pattern for organizing Indian society and led to the development of the caste system. A **caste** is a social class whose members are identified by the work that they do. A person belonged to a specific caste from birth. This did not change throughout his or her lifetime. Each group had its own occupation that was passed down from parent to child. Their caste determined whom people married, how they made their living and who their friends were. Why was this system created? No one knows for sure, but here is one idea offered by historians. The native people of the subcontinent greatly outnumbered the Aryans. It is possible that the caste system was a way to establish rules for everyone's behavior and to maintain order.

Like the societies of other ancient civilizations, Indian society can be pictured as a pyramid. Although there were actually hundreds of different castes, they were categorized into four main divisions. Priests, or **Brahmins**, made up the small, elite

group at the top. Warriors and government officials were considered **Kshatriyas** and ranked just below the Brahmins. Landowners, merchants and craftsmen were classified as **Vaishya**. Laborers and slaves were referred to as **Shudras**.



The lowest group in Indian society remained outside the caste system. They were referred to as **Dalits**, or untouchables. They did the work that no one else wanted to do. The untouchables, also referred to as outcasts, were forced to live apart from everyone else. If they traveled, they carried two sticks which they tapped together to warn others to stay away. Today, the nation of India has a democratic government and a constitution that outlaws discrimination based on caste. However, laws cannot totally erase centuries of tradition.

Along with the caste system, life in ancient India centered on the family. The oldest man in the family was in charge and made most of the decisions. For example, parents arranged marriages for their children, but the head of the family had the final say. Women had very few rights in this society. Unlike Egyptian women, they were forbidden to inherit property or to hold government positions. Boys from noble families attended schools, but girls were taught at home.

The Legacy of Ancient India

Even though they lived a long time ago, the ancient Indians continue to impact the modern world. In fact, you rely on some of their contributions every day. Can you imagine life without the numbers one through nine or zero? These numerals originated in India thousands of years ago. Arab traders found them useful when they exchanged products with the people of the subcontinent. The Arabs also traded with Western Europeans. They, too, began to use the Hindu-Arabic numerals to conduct business. The Indians developed a number system based on ten. We call this the decimal system today. In a number like 7,400, each numeral is worth ten times as much as the numeral to its right. Of course, none of this would work without a symbol for zero, which originated in India. Learn more about the development of the decimal by watching the video below.



Math concepts are not the only ways that the ancient Indians continue to influence our lives. Some of our current ideas about good health and wellbeing come from them. **Yoga** is a popular exercise that relaxes the mind and body. It was used for the same purpose on the Indian subcontinent centuries ago. Recently, scented oils have become popular. They create a feeling of peace and help to prevent the spread of some diseases. Using them for the same purposes was common practice in the Indus and Ganges River Valley. Through the work of archaeologists, we also know that the Indians were the first to do a form of plastic surgery. Through trade, they passed on new technology for the iron-making process. The tools that they created made farming more efficient and increased harvests. The video listed below explains more about the Indian expertise in iron. At the same time, two of the world's major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, began here. Their influence is now felt across the globe.



Time for a Quick Review

Before moving on to Unit 16, review the names and terms found in Unit 15. Be sure you can answer the “Can I” questions with a loud “yes”.

Can I

...identify the geographic features of the Indian subcontinent?

...cite the benefits of living near rivers?

...give examples of how humans modified the environment of the Indian subcontinent?

...explain how human modifications are connected to needs in particular environments?

...cite examples of the enduring influence of ancient India?

...cite factors that caused the movement of people to the Indian subcontinent?



Additional Activities and Resources

[Unit 15 Organizer](#)

[Chandragupta Maurya](#) (article courtesy of Thought Co.)