



Indus religion

The Indus civilization is usually thought to have been a theocracy (a state ruled by religious authorities), with the citadel mounds at Indus cities housing religious and administrative buildings.

At Mohenjo Daro, the citadel had a number of rooms opening on to a courtyard with a Great Bath, surely for some form of ritual bathing. On the other hand the citadel at Kalibangan had seven fire altars: fire-blackened pits in which sacrificial offerings had been burnt. Several other Indus towns also had fire altars on their

citadels or in private houses. But very few structures have been identified as temples and none with certainty.

Many clues suggest that later Indian religious beliefs and practices were inherited from the Indus religion. For example, female figurines could represent a Mother Goddess, a popular deity among ordinary South Asian folk down the ages.

The seals and many figurines depict cattle, still held in reverence in India; some suggest individual deities such as Shiva, seemingly depicted on a seal in his role as Lord of the Beasts.

The Indus people also appear to have had a detailed knowledge of astronomy: a star calendar charting the heavens was compiled in the 23rd century BC, when the Indus civilization was at its peak.

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Indo-Aryans

During the late 3rd and the 2nd millennia BC, horse-riding herders spread probably from the Caucasian steppe into West Asia and the Iranian plateau and as far as South Asia.

They spoke Indo-Aryan, a language belonging to the Indo-European language family, of which English and most other modern European languages are also members. Most South Asians today speak Indo-Aryan languages, but these have undergone changes in their vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation due to the influence of the Dravidian languages spoken by the people of the Indus region and probably by many other groups encountered by the Indo-Aryan invaders.

It is possible to trace the spread of these invaders using clues from these language changes. The Indo-Aryans composed hymns full of references to their way of life and their surroundings, the Vedas, handed down orally for centuries. Clues in the earliest of these, the Rigveda, show their gradual spread into the north-west and the Ganges Valley.

Archaeological evidence of their spread, however, is surprisingly elusive. A number of Late Indus towns have squatter occupations with some foreign material, and there are some finds of foreign-seeming burials and objects. Some northern settlements show signs of violent destruction.

It would appear therefore that this was not a massive invasion but a series of small-scale incursions. How then did the Indo-Aryan languages come to be so widely spoken?

This was probably a process that took many hundreds of years, but one important factor is that the Indo-Aryans were a warlike people, whereas our evidence shows no sign of warfare during the preceding Indus period. It would probably have been relatively easy for bands of Indo-Aryan warriors to dominate the peaceful farmers whose lands they were invading, their language being gradually adopted by their subjects.

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List of Rulers

Rulers of Magadha

525-493 BC	Bimbisara
493-461	Ajatasatru
	Darshaka
	Udayin
-413	Aniruddha

Shishunaga dynasty

413-395	Shishunaga
395-375	Kalasoka
375-321	Nanda dynasty
375-	Mahapadma Nanda
	6-8 later rulers including
c 350	Mahapadma Ugrasena
c 330	Dhana Nanda

Maurya dynasty

321-297	Chandragupta Maurya
297-272	Bindusara
272-232	Ashoka
	Kunala
-221	Dasaratha
	Samprati
	Salisuka
	ruler E
194 -187	Brihadratha

The reforming religions

By the mid 1st millennium BC, the Aryan religion of the Vedas (early hymns) had been substantially modified, due to interaction with native Indian beliefs and practices and in line with the needs of an urban and agrarian society very different from the horse-riding pastoral nomads of a thousand years before.

A key element in the developing Hindu religion was the belief in a cycle of rebirths from which ultimate release was sought. Various means were employed to gain this release, of which the practice of austerities (asceticism) was becoming particularly popular.

The caste system was gradually crystallizing -it was founded on the notion of degrees of ritual purity reflecting progress in the cycle of rebirths toward ultimate release and unity with the Absolute.

This was the climate in which a number of reforming religious sects emerged. Jainism, formulated by the 6th century saint, Mahavira, taught that every living thing

contained a soul whose goal was ultimate unity with the absolute. Non-violence was consequently much stressed, even the accidental killing of insects being abhorred.

Jainism require 'Three Jewels': right faith, right knowledge and right conduct, the latter tending towards asceticism.

Buddhism, taught by Mahavira's younger contemporary, the Buddha, rejected extremes of asceticism or self-indulgent attachment to material pleasures and advocated the Middle Way between them.

By practising virtues such as right thinking and right action, its followers might attain Nirvana (liberation from the bonds of mortality and unification with the Absolute).

A major and significant difference between Buddhism and other religious sects of the time is that the Buddhists formed a community (Church) consisting of both the Sangha (the monastic community) and lay followers, which united its adherents and developed over the centuries into a powerful economic and political force.

Stupas

At the time of the Buddha, it was the custom to erect funerary mounds (stupas) over the cremated remains of honoured or holy individuals. By the 1st century BC, the cremated remains were often enclosed in reliquaries (relic caskets) of precious materials and the stupas were substantial and highly decorated brick and stone monuments.

They were composed of a number of standard elements: A circular drum at the base supporting a dome surmounted by a square railing enclosing a set of tiered umbrellas (or in Sri Lanka an elegant spire). Around the stupa was a paved area for the religious practice of 'pradakshina' (walking around it in a clockwise direction)- and outside this a railing pierced by four gates.

Initially only the gateways and railings were decorated; later decorative slabs also adorned the stupa itself. Often these depicted scenes from the life of the Buddha or from the parables told of his former incarnations, but many elements from folk art and popular religion were also included: Voluptuous tree-spirits, benevolent snake deities, courting couples, massive dwarfs supporting pillars of the structure, mythical beasts.

At Amaravati, some slabs depict stupas, heavily hung with flower garlands, that give us a vivid impression of the original appearance of these now ruinous structures.

Buddhist monasteries

The Buddha and his disciples had spent most of their year travelling and teaching but during the rainy season they remained in one place, often occupying simple huts on land donated by lay followers of Buddhism.

Through time, donations from many wealthy patrons transformed these from temporary shelters into permanently occupied monasteries. The majority of these were constructed of stone or wood - traces of these survive at towns like Nagarjunakonda. But some were cut from the easily carved laterite stone of the Western Ghats mountain range in western India; Ajanta is the most famous of these.

Typically monasteries consisted of monks' individual cells and many communal facilities such as dining hall and bathing places; larger establishments could include a hospital.

Shrines were also an essential feature: these were usually in the form of a pillared hall containing a statue of the Buddha or a stupa (relic mound). Guest houses were

an important feature of many monasteries, which were often located at ports or on major trade routes.

Merchants who lodged there during their travels were themselves often lay devotees of Buddhism and proved generous patrons; local rulers, guilds of craftsmen and devotees from all walks of life also donated goods, lands and revenues to monasteries.

Alexander the Great

Alexander is rated among the greatest military commanders that ever lived. He was a brilliant tactician, inspiring fierce loyalty from his troops. His quest for military glory was unquenchable and he probably would never have stopped his military advance had it not been for a mutiny of his tired soldiers in India, an event which he viewed as a personal betrayal.

In the course of his campaigns of conquest (particularly in Asia) he became increasingly autocratic and alienated many of his companions and closest friends. Several plots against him or his policies were attempted or at least suspected: Alexander dealt mercilessly with those involved, executing even Callisthenes, the official historian of his eastern expeditions and nephew of his beloved tutor Aristotle.

His attempted policy of integration between his Macedonian followers and his newly acquired Persian subjects involved him adopting oriental customs and clothing which proved extremely unpopular with many Macedonians.

Particularly offensive to the Macedonians, accustomed to democracy and plain-speaking, was Alexander's attempt to introduce the Persian practice of 'proskynesis' (prostration) by which Persian nobles traditionally showed honour to their king.

Whether he would have been as successful as the ruler of his great empire as he was as a military leader we shall never know, due to his untimely death in 323 BC, at the age of 32.

His empire was soon partitioned amongst his generals, but the legacy of Alexander lived on. Greek civilization, language and culture became established over a vast area, from Egypt to the borders of India.

Life under the Mauryans and their contemporaries

Despite domestic political upheavals and foreign invasions, the period between 200 BC and AD 50 saw considerable prosperity in South Asia. Foreign rulers, like the Shakas, adopted many aspects of Indian life, such as native religions, philosophies and political institutions.

Many of the developments that had occurred under the Mauryans, such as road building, continued. Buddhism provided a major stimulus to architecture, especially rock-cut temples and monasteries in western India and the widespread -stupas (relic mounds).

It was also a major inspiration to art. Folk art underpins the artistic developments of central India while in the north art reflects a cosmopolitan culture, with Indo-Greek, Parthian and Central Asian elements being supplemented by western influences resulting from trade and itinerant craftsmen drawn by the rich patronage then available.

Tremendous international trade and commerce characterized this period, bringing great prosperity to both north and south.

Craftsmen's guilds prospered greatly. These were organized either by individual crafts, such as pottery-making or metalworking, or as co-operatives of different

artisans engaged in a single enterprise, such as the construction and decoration of temples. The guild often controlled every aspect of the lives of its members and their families.

Wealthy guild members were among the many patrons of the Buddhist Sangha (monastic community), the growing wealth of which in turn provided considerable patronage for guild activities.

The Kushans

In 165 BC on China's borders, the Xiongnu nomads defeated the Yuechi nomads and drove them westwards. One branch of the Yuechi, the Kushans, penetrated South Asia through Afghanistan and Kashmir and by the mid 1st century AD were gaining possession of most of northern India and the heart of the Ganges plain.

Kushan holdings reached their maximum extent under their greatest ruler, Kanishka (late 1st century AD). As well as ruling north and east India, the Kushans retained control of a large area of Central Asia. This gave them a foot in both camps. Although they rapidly assimilated much of Indian culture, they also retained a strong non-Indian element, clearly visible in their art.

The Kushans patronized many native and foreign religions, but particularly Buddhism. Mutual hostility to the Parthians united the Kushans with their Roman trading partners to the west, and their Central Asian territories allowed the Kushans to operate a northern trade route bypassing Parthian lands.

In the mid 3rd century BC, the Sassanians of Iran, having overthrown the Parthians, turned their aggressive attentions to the Kushans whom they defeated.

The Kushans continued to rule a part of their lands as vassals of the Sassanians; but hostile southern neighbours progressively reduced their territories in the peninsula.

The Spread of Buddhism into Central Asia

When Gandhara and adjacent areas in the north became part of the Mauryan Empire in the 4th century BC, they and the Indo-Greek regions beyond them became exposed to cultural influences from the south.

The third Mauryan emperor, Ashoka, actively promoted the spread of Buddhism, which now became established in Bactria and Gandhara where a school of fine western-influenced Buddhist art developed.

Trade routes developing through the inhospitable lands of Central Asia carried Buddhism into oasis settlements like Kashgar and Khotan. In the 1st century AD the establishment of the Kushan Empire which straddled India and western Central Asia and the vigorous military-backed colonization of eastern Central Asia from China greatly strengthened contacts between east and west.

The Kushan emperor Kanishka promoted Buddhism and during his reign Buddhist missionaries travelled as far as China where Buddhism had already been introduced by traders and where it now rapidly gained popularity. From there it was introduced to Japan in the mid 1st millennium AD.

Many towns on the trade routes around the Takla Makan desert and further north in Central Asia had prosperous Buddhist monasteries and shrines, richly decorated with sculptures, paintings and portable art such as silken banners.

The styles of these reflect the cosmopolitan nature of their inhabitants - Indian, Greek, Roman, Parthian, Sassanian, Chinese and Central Asian. The religions practised here are corresponding diverse, not just Buddhism but also Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity and Judaism, with the addition of Islam from the 7th century AD.

Trans-Asian trade

Extensive trade routes linked the Roman Empire to India and China, bringing luxury goods to the homes of wealthy Romans. The network of trans-Asian trade incorporated both maritime and overland routes. Ships sailed from ports on the Red Sea to India, taking advantage of the seasonal monsoon winds.

The principal overland route consisted of several caravan routes known as the Silk Road, which crossed the Central Asian steppes from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers to China.

A remarkable collection from a palace storeroom found at Begram in Afghanistan contained bronze statuettes, glass vases, plaster medallions and pottery deriving from the Roman Empire, as well as goods from China and India.

Chinese silk found popularity in Rome, where in the 3rd century AD it was valued at its weight in gold. Spices, textiles, ebony and precious stones were obtained from India, in exchange for Roman gold and silver coins, wine, glassware and Arretine pottery.

The Shakas

The Yuechi nomads moving west from the borders of China pushed their western neighbours, various Scythian (Shaka) tribes into western lands. By 87 BC a mixed Shaka and Indo-Parthian group were in control of the north-west while other Shakas had penetrated deeply into the north-east.

The considerable Shaka dominions followed the Persian system of government, dividing their territories into provinces ruled by governors and subdivided into smaller units. Shaka rule in the western region survived into the 5th century AD. In the east, however, they were driven out by the Kushans, descendants of a branch of the Yuechi.

Mahabharata

The great Indian epic, 'Mahabharata', was the work of many poets over hundreds of years, up to the 5th century AD.

It refers back to a legendary war, supposedly thousands of years earlier; archaeologists consider that it is actually woven around events of about the 9th century BC.

This war developed between the Kurus and the Pandavas, rivals for the kingship of Kurukshetra. Other kingdoms, from as far afield as western India, were drawn into the conflict which came to a head in a great ten day battle, from which the Pandavas emerged victorious.

Here an eyewitness, Samjaya, describes the moments before the battle begins.