

Classical Civilization: India

The Framework for Indian History: Geography and a Formative Period

- Geography (including the **mountainous northern region** and **agricultural regions** along the **Indus** and **Ganges** rivers) and climate were major influences on Indian civilization.
- The **Aryan** culture, which dominated India after the fall of the Indus River Valley civilization, also played a formative role. Among other things, the Aryans brought the rudiments of the **caste system**.
- The **Vedas**, the ***Mahabharata***, the ***Ramayana***, and the ***Upanishads*** formed the basis of a great Aryan literary tradition.

Patterns in Classical India

- Two major empires formed at the crucial periods in classical Indian history, the **Mauryan** and, later, the **Gupta**.
- The Greek conquest of the Indus and the exchange of ideas with the Mediterranean basin and southwest Asia influenced the rise of the Mauryan dynasty.
- **Chandragupta Maurya** was the first Mauryan ruler, and **Ashoka** the greatest. Ashoka expanded the empire and promoted **Buddhism**.
- The Guptas arose after a period of nomadic invasions, and created a long period of political stability.

Political Institutions

- **Regionalism** and **political diversity** dominated classical Indian political life, so central authority was relatively weak.
- The increasingly complex caste system promoted public order the way more conventional government structures did in many other cultures.

Religion and Culture

- **Hinduism** and Buddhism were integral parts of classical Indian life. They had great influence on the arts and sciences, and both tended to promote religious tolerance.
- Hinduism is a **polytheistic** faith that gradually became more complex. It stresses **reincarnation**, the shallowness of worldly concerns, and ***dharma***, the moral path.
- Buddhism, founded by **Siddhartha Gautama** in the 6th century B.C.E., scorned caste and the material world in favor of self control and the Eightfold Path to **nirvana**.

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- By the last centuries B.C.E., the Indian civilization developed a written language, built cities, and produced art and literature, and nurtured two of the great world religions. Artistic patterns linked to religion and a significant scientific tradition developed.

Economy and Society

- Dominated by the caste system, India developed extensive internal commercial and international maritime trade. However, India's economy remained essentially agricultural.
- Family life combined patriarchy with an emphasis on mutual emotional support.

Indian Influence

- Classical India had an enormous effect on other parts of the world. India emerged as the **center of a Eurasian trade system**, a source of great wealth and a means of exporting Indian culture abroad.

China and India

- **China and India offer important contrasts** in political emphases, social systems, and cultures.
- **They also resembled each other** in seeking to build stable structures over large areas and in using culture to justify social inequality.

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The highest Hindu caste members in India after the Epic Age were the
 - (A) Shudras (workers).
 - (B) Vaisayas (merchants, herders).
 - (C) Kshatriya (warriors, rulers).
 - (D) Brahmans (priests, scholars).
 - (E) Dasas or the Dravidian peoples.
2. The Indian caste system
 - (A) differed little from other systems of inequality in the ancient world.
 - (B) closely resembled the Greco-Roman class structure.
 - (C) was extremely complex and stratified; a person could almost never change caste.
 - (D) had little basis in Hindu religious writings.
 - (E) integrated non-Aryans into ruling castes as a way of political control.
3. A central message of the Bhagavad Gita is that
 - (A) great crises should warrant breaking caste rules.
 - (B) those who worship Krishna can expect to be punished for their sins and denied paradise.
 - (C) reincarnation always happens along caste lines.
 - (D) meditation is the most effective path toward *nirvana*.
 - (E) one must carry out the duties that come with one's caste.
4. A major difference between Buddhism and Hinduism was that
 - (A) Buddhism denied the need for caste, rites, and sacrifice to achieve nirvana.
 - (B) Hinduism was monotheistic, and Buddhism was polytheistic.

- (C) Buddhism denied rebirth, reincarnation, and emphasized the real world.
- (D) Buddhism encouraged its followers to renounce the political world.
- (E) Hinduism taught respect for all living things and prohibited killing.
5. Buddhism spread primarily as a result of
- (A) the caste system.
- (B) the appeal of ritualistic sacrifice and the performing of intricate rites flawlessly.
- (C) its monastic community.
- (D) Gupta rulers.
- (E) warfare with Brahman opponents.
6. Alexander the Great's invasion of India
- (A) led to the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism to the Mediterranean world.
- (B) disrupted the existing trade routes between India and the Mediterranean.
- (C) had little lasting influence on either region.
- (D) led to the rise of the Mauryans.
- (E) isolated India from contacts with other regions.
7. Buddhism lost its appeal and influence in Guptan India in part because
- (A) Hinduism showed its adaptability by emphasizing its mystical side, thus retaining the loyalties of many Indians.
- (B) unpopular Guptas supported Buddhism, which led to Buddhism's decline.
- (C) Islam was introduced and replaced both Hinduism and Buddhism.
- (D) Hindus abandoned the caste system, making Hinduism more attractive.
- (E) merchants, the chief patrons of Buddhism, abandoned the religion for Islam.
8. During the classical era in India, all of the following occurred EXCEPT
- (A) religious authorities often allowed dissections in the name of research.
- (B) spherical shrines to Buddha, called *stupas*, were erected.
- (C) the concept of zero was invented.
- (D) sculpture and painting moved away from realistic portrayals of the human form to a more stylized representation.
- (E) Indians developed an interest in spontaneity and imagination.
9. Over time in classical India, castes
- (A) were replaced by simpler social groups.
- (B) died out as Buddhism spread throughout India.
- (C) intensified and began to differ from region to region.
- (D) lost their religious significance.
- (E) removed restrictions on gender.
10. In Mesopotamia, the cuneiform culture of the Mesopotamians assimilated invaders and provided continuity. The same role in India was performed by
- (A) Buddhism.
- (B) the Hindu social hierarchy.
- (C) Jain philosophy.
- (D) the Greek culture introduced by Alexander the Great.
- (E) the culture of the Indus Valley peoples.

Free-Response Question

Compare and contrast the classical civilizations of India and China.

ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

Multiple-Choice Questions

- **1. (D) is correct.** The Brahmin caste stood atop the Indian class hierarchy, followed by (in order) the Kshatriya, the Vaisayas, the Shudras, and the untouchables.
- **2. (C) is correct.** Over time, the caste system became enormously complex and rigid; marriage between castes was made punishable by death.
- **3. (E) is correct.** The great sacred hymn *Bhagavad Gita* includes a classic story in which a warrior sent to do battle against his own relatives is urged to do his duty. Krishna reminds the warrior that the divine spirit of his relatives will live on.
- **4. (A) is correct.** Buddhism rejects caste, ritual, and priests in favor of meditation, prayer, and the “destruction of self.”
- **5. (C) is correct.** Along with the emperor Ashoka, groups of monks—organized in monasteries but preaching throughout the world—were the most successful means of spreading Buddhism.
- **6. (D) is correct.** The Mauryan Empire began as a reaction to the Alexandrian state of Bactria along the Indus River.
- **7. (A) is correct.** Hinduism’s ability to adapt to the needs of local communities was instrumental in its spread.
- **8. (A) is correct.** Religious authorities hampered medical research by placing restrictions on dissection.
- **9. (C) is correct.** The caste system developed numerous sublevels as it developed, and often local idiosyncrasies prevailed.
- **10. (B) is correct.** Despite some inroads made by Buddhism, the caste system was the dominant feature of all Indian society.

Free-Response Essay Sample Response

Compare and contrast the classical civilizations of India and China.

A comparison of classical China and India exposes the cultural variety of the era. Both societies had radically different organizing forces; in India, it was the caste system, while in China it was Confucianism-influenced political structures. Hinduism produced a sensual, otherworldly, and monolithic religious atmosphere in India, while the more secular Confucianism and Daoism competed for the attention in China. Though each civilization had an agriculturally-based economy, merchants were valued in India and looked down on in China. Even in science and mathematics, Indians were more theoretical while the Chinese emphasized practical findings. Perhaps the greatest similarity between the two cultures was the dominance of men in both India and China.