CHAPTER 7 - INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1500 B.C.E.–1025 C.E.

I. Foundations of Indian Civilization, 1500 B.C.E.–300 C.E.

A. The Indian Subcontinent

1. India has three topographical zones: (1) the northern mountainous zone; (2) the Indus and Ganges Basins; and (3) the peninsula. The Vindhya Mountains and the Deccan plateau divide the peninsula from the other two zones.

2. The peninsula itself includes further topographical sub-regions including: (1) tropical Kerala coast in the west; (2) Coromandel Coast in the east; (3) flat area of Tamil Nadu in the south; and (4) island of Sri Lanka.

3. Peninsular India and the Ganges Valley have a subtropical climate and plentiful rainfall. The Indus Valley is dry and agriculture there relies on irrigation. The staple crop of the Ganges Delta is rice; elsewhere, the staple crops are wheat, millet, and barley.

4. This geographical diversity has made it very difficult for any political power to unify all of India for any great length of time.

B. The Vedic Age

1. After the demise of the Indus Valley civilization, Indo-European warriors migrated into India. They were organized in patriarchal families and kinship groups, and at first, they herded cattle in the northwest. After 1000 B.C.E. some of them began to push into the Ganges Valley, using new iron tools to fell trees and cultivate the land. The oral tradition of these light-skinned Arya tribes tells of a violent struggle between themselves and the darker-skinned Dravidian-speaking Dasas, whom they evidently pushed into southern India.

2. The struggle between Aryas and Dasas led to the development of the system of varna, meaning “color” but equivalent to “class.” Under this system, people were born into one of four varna: (1) Brahmin (priests/scholars); (2) Kshatriya (warriors); (3) Vaishya (merchants); and (4) Shudra (peasant/laborer). A fifth group, Untouchables, was outside the system and consisted of persons who did demeaning or ritually polluting work such as work that involved contact with the dead bodies of animals or humans.

3. The four varna were subdivided into hereditary occupational groups called jati (also known by the Portuguese word caste). Jati were also arranged in order of hierarchy; complex rules governed the appropriate occupation, duties, and rituals of each jati and laid forth regulations concerning interaction between people of different jati.

4. The systems of varna and jati were rationalized by belief in reincarnation. According to this belief, each individual has an immortal spirit (atman) that will be reborn in another body after death. One’s station in the next life depends on one’s actions (karma) in this and previous lives.

5. Vedic religion emphasized the worship of male deities through sacrifice. Religious knowledge and practice was the monopoly of the Brahmin priestly varna who memorized the rituals, prayers, and hymns and may have opposed the introduction of writing in order to maintain their monopoly in religious knowledge.

6. We do not know much about the status or roles of women in the Vedic period. They could study lore and participate in rituals, they could own land, and they married in their middle or late teens.
C. Challenges to the Old Order: Jainism and Buddhism
1. During the Vedic period, people who reacted against the rigid social hierarchy and against the religious monopoly of the Brahmins would withdraw into the forests where they pursued salvation through yoga (spiritual and mental discipline), special diets, or meditation. Their goal was to achieve moksha—liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The ideas of these religious dissidents are reflected in the Upanishads.
2. Jainism was founded by Mahavira (540–468 B.C.E.). Jains practiced nonviolence and went to extremes in their attempts not to kill any living thing. The most extreme went naked and starved themselves to death. The less extreme devoted themselves to commerce and banking—occupations that, unlike agriculture, do not require one to kill.
3. Siddhartha Gautama founded Buddhism. His title, “Buddha,” means “Enlightened One.” Alienated by both the extremes of a wealthy youth and six years of asceticism, Siddhartha Gautama set forth his teaching of the “Four Noble Truths” and of the Eightfold Path that would lead the individual to enlightenment. Some of his followers took vows of celibacy, nonviolence, and poverty.
4. The original form of Buddhism centered on the individual’s attempts to gain enlightenment through moderate living, self-discipline, and meditation. Their goal was to achieve nirvana—release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. According to Buddhist teaching, all things are composite, including the individual. This stands in contrast to the Vedic belief in the existence of an eternal soul (atman).
5. After the death of the Buddha, some of his followers organized themselves into monasteries and nunneries and developed a complex, hierarchical religion, complete with worship of the Buddha, reverence for bodhisattvas, and artistic representations of the Buddha. The religion broke into two major schools: Mahayana and Theravada. Mahayana incorporated the new beliefs, while Theravada followed the original teaching of the Buddha more closely.

D. The Rise of Hinduism
1. Pressure from new religious movements like Jainism and Buddhism led to a reform of the old Vedic religion. As a result of this reform, the foundational elements of Vedic religion incorporated the intense personal religious devotion, fertility rituals, symbolism of the southern Dravidian cultures, and elements of Buddhism. Sacrifice became less important while the role of personal devotion to the gods increased.
2. As a part of the reform, two formerly minor Vedic deities took the places of honor in the Hindu pantheon. These deities were Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. Also prominent in the new religious tradition was the goddess Devi. These and all the other countless gods and goddesses were understood to be manifestations of a single divine force.
3. Hindu worship centered on temples and shrines and included puja (service to a deity) and pilgrimage. The Ganges River became one of the most popular pilgrimage sites.
4. The religious duties of an individual varied according to gender, social status, and age.
5. The transformation from Vedic religion to Hinduism was so successful that Hinduism became the dominant religion of India. Hinduism appealed to common people’s need for personal deities with whom they could have a direct connection. Theravada Buddhism was too austere to have popular appeal, and Mahayana Buddhism was so close to Hinduism that its beliefs could easily be absorbed by the larger religion.
II. Imperial Expansion and Collapse, 324 B.C.E.–650 C.E.

A. The Mauryan Empire, 324 B.C.E.–184 B.C.E.

1. The core of the Mauryan Empire was the kingdom of Magadha, which benefited from its strategic location and plentiful agricultural and iron resources. The Mauryan Empire was founded by Chandragupta and expanded by himself and his successors Bindusara and Ashoka until it included almost the entire subcontinent. Tradition has it that a Machiavellian Brahmin, Kautilya, guided Chandragupta.

2. The Mauryan government made its capital at the walled and moated city of Pataliputra. The imperial establishment, including a large army, was supported by a 25 percent tax on the agricultural products of the empire and by state monopolies on mines, shipbuilding, and armaments.

3. The most famous Mauryan emperor is Ashoka (r. 269–232 B.C.E.). Ashoka, shaken by the carnage in a brutal war of expansion in the south, converted to Buddhism. His Buddhist policies of government are preserved in edicts that were inscribed on rocks and pillars at various points throughout his empire.

B. Commerce and Culture in an Era of Political Fragmentation

1. The Mauryan empire collapsed in 184 B.C.E. Northern India fell into a period of political fragmentation that included rule of the northwest by the Shakas (Scythians, 50 B.C.E.–50 C.E.) and the Kushans (50–240 C.E.).

2. Political fragmentation in northern India was accompanied by economic development in which guilds of artisans and merchants played a dominant role.

3. The period of political fragmentation was also characterized by cultural development that included the writing of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The latter includes the famous Bhagavad-Gita, which addresses the contradiction between duty to society and duty to one’s own soul. The Bhagavad-Gita suggests that this contradiction can be resolved when one is aware that any form of disciplined action taken without regard for personal benefit is a service to the gods. The period also saw developments in herbal medicine and linguistics.

4. During the period of political fragmentation in the north, central and south India experienced different patterns of development. The Andhra dynasty established an independent state in the Deccan (second century B.C.E. to second century C.E.). In southern India, divided among three Tamil kingdoms: Cholas, Pandyas, and Cheras, this was a period of great artistic achievement.

C. The Gupta Empire, 320–550 C.E.

1. Like the Mauryan Empire, the Gupta Empire began with the kingdom of Magadha. The rulers of the Gupta Empire brought northern and central India under their control, but not the south. Like the Mauryan rulers, the Guptas controlled iron deposits, established state monopolies, and collected a 25 percent agricultural tax. However, they were never as strong as the Mauryan Empire.

2. The Guptas used their army to control the core of their empire, but provincial administration was left to governors who often made their posts into hereditary and subordinate kingdoms and kinship groups.

3. Because the Gupta did not have sufficient military force, they exercised power as a “theater-state,” redistributing profits and luxury goods from trade and dazzling its dependents with elaborate ceremonies in return for gifts and other favors.
4. We have very little archaeological data and few contemporary accounts from which to learn about the politics, society, and culture of the Gupta period. We know that the court supported mathematics and astronomy and that Gupta mathematicians invented our “Arabic” numerals and the concept of “zero.” We also have the Chinese monk Faxian’s description of his journey through Gupta India.

5. During the Gupta period, women lost the right to inherit and own property and to participate in key rituals, and were treated like the lowest varna (Shudra). They were married very young, and in some places a widow was required to burn herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. Among the few ways to escape this low status was to join a religious community, to be a member of an extremely wealthy family, or to be a courtesan.

6. The Gupta period, while dominated by Hinduism, was characterized by religious toleration and saw the development of the classic form of Hindu temples with exterior courtyard, inner shrine, and wall decorations.

7. Gupta India was linked to the outside world by extensive trade networks. Trade with southeast and east Asia was particularly flourishing.

8. In 550 C.E. the Gupta empire collapsed under the financial burden of defense against the Huns. Harsha (r. 606–647 C.E.), whose kingdom is described by the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, briefly reunited northern India. After Harsha, northern India again fell into political fragmentation.

9. During the Gupta period numerous small kingdoms ruled the Deccan and south India. The most notable of these were the southern warrior kingdoms of the Pallavas and the Cholas.

III. Southeast Asia, 50–1025 C.E.

A. Geography and Resources

1. Southeast Asia has three geographical zones: (1) the Indo-china mainland; (2) the Malay peninsula; and (3) the islands. The area stands between China and India, and has been influenced by both civilizations.

2. Natural resources include fertile agricultural lands, dependable monsoon rains, and several growing seasons a year. This enabled the area to support a large, dense population.

B. Early Civilization

1. Early inhabitants of Southeast Asia practiced swidden (slash and burn) agriculture and domesticated important crops and animals, including rice, soybeans, sugar cane, chickens, and pigs.

2. Southeast Asia received waves of migration of Malay peoples from southern China. Malay migrations subsequently continued into the Pacific islands and into the Indian Ocean. Early Malay groups in Southeast Asia lived in small villages, manufactured bronze tools, and were organized in small political units.

3. The first large states in Southeast Asia emerged in the early centuries C.E. in response to the position of Southeast Asia as a crossroads for trade and travel between India and China. Trade brought business; it also brought Hindu/Buddhist culture.

4. The first major state to appear in Southeast Asia was Funan (first through sixth centuries B.C.E.) in the Mekong delta area. Funan thrived due to its domination of the Isthmus of Kra. Funan’s decline in the sixth century may be related to the opening of new trade routes that bypassed Funan.
C. The Srivijayan Kingdom

1. Srivijaya was located on Sumatra and dominated the new southern trade route through the Strait of Malacca as well as other shipping routes through the area of modern Malaysia and Indonesia.

2. The Srivijayan political system knit together four different ecological zones and their local rulers under the authority of the Srivijayan king. These four zones were: (1) the core area along the Musi River; (2) the upland Sumatran interior; (3) river ports; and (4) the fertile rice lands of central Java.

3. The Srivijayan kings maintained their control over this complex system through a combination of military power, diplomacy, control of trade, and the techniques of the “theater-state.” Kings used the splendor of their capital to attract resources and labor. The temporal power of the kings was enhanced by popular belief in their magical powers. Kings were associated with forces of fertility. They also patronized Buddhist monasteries and schools.

4. Indian culture exercised a powerful influence on Srivijayan concepts of kingship and government, while the Hindu and Buddhist religions became the dominant faiths of the region. Srivijayans did not, however, simply imitate India; they borrowed selectively from Indian civilization and adapted what they borrowed to their own culture and needs.

5. Changes in trade routes led to the decline of Srivijaya in the eleventh century. The capital was destroyed in 1025 by the Chola kingdom.