

# South Asia Notes

## The Indus River Valley

Like many early civilizations, India's first civilization grew up in a fertile river valley. One of the most fascinating yet mysterious cultures of the ancient world is the Harappan Civilization. This culture existed along the Indus River Valley in modern day Pakistan and lasted from 2500 b.c.e. to 1500 b.c.e.

The Indus River Valley civilization was named after the city of Harappa which it was centered around. Harappa and the city of Mohenjo-Daro were the greatest achievements of the Indus valley civilization. These cities are well known for their impressive and organized layout. Over one hundred other towns and villages also existed in this region. The Harappan people were literate and used the Dravidian language. Only part of this language has been deciphered today, leaving numerous questions about this civilization unanswered.

The Indus River Valley offered rich soil, access to water and irrigation making it easier for the Harappan people to practice agriculture. The Indus River Valley was also protected by natural defensive borders from the Hindu Kush Mountains, Himalayas and Thar Desert. However, the people did do a good deal of trading with other ancient civilizations in the Middle East.

The Harappan civilization experienced its height around 2500 b.c.e. and began to decline about 2000 b.c.e. The causes of its downfall are not certain. One theory is that the Indus River Valley declined from natural causes such as floods, the erosion of the soil and or climate change which made food production difficult. Another theory suggests that a group of people called the Aryans moved into the area. Aryan religious texts and human remains in Mohenjo-Daro suggest that the Aryans may have violently entered the area, killing its inhabitants and burning the cities.

## The Aryan Invasion

The arrival of a nomadic and warlike people called the Aryans may have contributed to the final collapse of the Indus River Valley civilization. Already weak from decline, the Indus people were probably too weak to resist the newcomers.

The Aryans swept into India through the high passes in the Hindu Kush Mountains such as the Kyber Pass. They came between 1500 b.c.e. and 1200 b.c.e. from lands in central Russia northwest of India. Although illiterate, the Aryans moved into the areas of modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan and brought with them horses, chariots and iron weapon technology. Their overall conquering of the Indus Valley has been attributed to their superior iron tools and weapons as well as their horse drawn war chariots which they used to defeat their enemies.

Along with modern weapons, the Aryans brought many cultural traditions to India which can still be found within Indian society today. The Aryans were both farmers and herders. They placed great value on cattle. Men received cattle as a reward when they were successful at war.

People measured wealth in terms of the number of cattle they had. Today in India, cows are considered sacred and are not eaten but left to roam the cities and countryside.

The Aryans also brought their belief system to the Indus Valley. The Aryans believed in many gods and developed a written language called Sanskrit. They recorded their oral traditions and prayers down into a text called the Rig-Veda. The Rig-Veda is a collection of over 1,000 hymns, which contain the mythology of the Hindu gods, and is considered to be one of the foundations of the Hindu religion.

The Aryans are also responsible for introducing the caste system which is still a major element of Indian culture today. The Aryans divided people into classes or castes based on their job or duty in society. At the top of the social order were priests and scholars with servants and peasant making up the bottom rungs of society.

### **The Maurya Dynasty**

After the Aryans, India was often conquered and reconquered by strong rulers. However, the northern plains of India were more often a battle ground than not. Rival princes waged war with one another and with invaders who regularly came into the area.

The first ruler to unite the northern India was Chandragupta Maurya (chuhn druh gup tuh mawr yah) who established the Maurya Empire which lasted for 140 years. Chandragupta used war to conquer neighboring lands and expand his territory from the Hindu Kush Mountains all the south to the Deccan Plateau.

Chandragupta's grandson Asoka added to the empire with more bloody war and harsh rule. Asoka was born in 304 BC and came to the throne in 270 BC, after a power struggle that resulted in the death of one of his brothers. He brought the Maurya Empire to the height of its power and for several years he waged war to conquer more land. In 260 b.c.e. Asoka attacked his southern neighbor. More than 100,000 people died in the fighting and the slaughter sickened Asoka. Overwhelmed by the carnage he had caused, Asoka changed his way of life. Asoka then converted to Buddhism and gave up violence. He then set out to rule his empire kindly and without force.

In remorse for his bloody attack on Kalinga, Asoka renounced war forever and became a Buddhist. He sent missionaries to South East Asia, present day Libya, Egypt, and Syria. His son, Mahinda, became a monk and was sent to introduce Buddhism to Sri Lanka. In Asoka's empire, all religions were tolerated but Buddhism was preferred. Buddhism became a major religion in Asia under Asoka.

### **The Muslim Invasion**

In the mid-600s, the religion of Islam rose in the Middle East. In the centuries that followed, waves of Muslims swept into South Asia. They included Mongols from Central Asia, Afghans, Turks, and Persians.

Muslim invaders attacked and plundered the rich cities of India. Some set up their own kingdoms. Around 1200, Muslim rulers set up a capital at Delhi. For 300 years, these Delhi sultans, or rulers, governed much of northern and central India.

Like Muslim rulers elsewhere, the Delhi sultans generally did not force their Hindu subjects to adopt Islam. Instead, non-Muslims had to pay special taxes and they could not get high-level government jobs. This would all change once the Mongols invaded in 1398.

### **The Mongol Invasion**

The Mongols from Central Asia came to India in 1398 and attacked and destroyed Delhi. The Mongol invaders killed or enslaved the entire population of the city and carried off its treasures.

Unlike earlier invaders, the Muslim conquerors and Hindu people did not get along well. The differences between Muslims and Hindus were too great. Islam was based on belief in one God. Hindus worshipped many gods. Islam taught that all Muslims were equal before God while under Hinduism they supported the caste system, which was built on inequality. Muslims required believers to follow strictly the laws of the Koran – the holy book of Islam. Hindus had many sacred writings and tolerated many different beliefs. To Muslims, cattle were a source of food. To Hindus, cattle were sacred animals that could not be killed.

Such differences led to conflict. Muslim armies smashed Hindu temples, destroying images of Hindu gods and goddesses. In northern India, where Muslim rule was strongest, many Hindus converted to Islam. Hindus converted to escape the tax imposed on nonbelievers, get jobs in government and/or escape the caste system. Farther south, where Muslim rule was weaker, few Hindus changed their religion.

### **The Mughal Empire**

Despite clashes between Hindus and Muslims, the two groups slowly learned to live together. The Mughal Empire founded by leader Babur in 1526 lasted for more than 300 years. At its height, it united most of the peoples of South Asia.

The golden age occurred during the rule of Akbar, grandson of Babur, who realized that to rule India he had to lead Hindus as well as Muslims. Adopting a policy of religious toleration, he married a Hindu princess and abolished the special tax on Hindus. He also appointed Hindus to jobs in government. Today, Indians honor Akbar as a master of compromise.

Under the Mughals, a brilliant culture emerged, blending both Hindu and Muslim traditions. Hindus architects designed and built mosques, Muslims houses of worship. Hindus absorbed many Persian legends and myths into their own literature.

One of the best examples of blended Hindu and Muslim culture is the Taj Mahal. History says that Shah Jahan, the Mughal king in the early 17th century lost his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal. He constructed Taj Mahal in her memory and as a resting place for her tomb. The tomb of the Emperor and his wife are placed side-by-side inside this beautiful piece of architecture.

During the creation of this great monument wealth was poured in. Situated at the banks of Agra's Yamuna River, Taj Mahal is an achievement of almost 20,000 stone carvers, masons, and artists. These workers were employed from all over India and some came from as far as Turkey and Iraq . It took them almost 20 years to complete this monument and the lush gardens. Sadly all these artists were rewarded for their good work by the chopping of their hands so that they would never be able to recreate this beautiful monument.

The Taj Mahal is made from white marble stone with precious gems and stones embedded in its walls. It appears pink in the morning, white during daytime and golden during evening. The four pillars called *minarets* around the main dome are slightly tilted so that they fall away from the central tomb in case they collapse. The precious stones were plundered and looted by the foreign invaders. The Taj Mahal is a perfectly symmetrical building except at one place and that is the tomb of Emperor and his Queen. This is because Taj Mahal was to just have the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal and not the Emperor's when it was planned.

Mughal power weakened in the 1700s. Wasteful spending hurt the empire. Also Akbar's successors ended his policy of religious cooperation between the Hindus and Muslims. They imposed heavy taxes on Hindus again, closed Hindu schools, and dismissed Hindus from government. Such actions led Hindu princes to revolt. Civil war among Muslim princes also broke out. The emperor continued to rule over a brilliant court, but his power over the land declined. At the same time, a new wave of intruders – the Europeans were arriving in growing numbers