

## **Chapter 9: State, Society, and the Quest for Salvation in India**

### **Overview**

This chapter addresses the significant developments in classical India between about 520 B.C.E. and 550 C.E., during which two influential empires emerged in northern India: the Mauryan and the Gupta. Although these two state systems were not permanent, they contributed to the growth of long-distance trading networks, the consolidation of cultural traditions, and the promotion of several significant religions. More specifically, India, during this period of one thousand years or so, witnessed the following important developments:

- A high volume of manufacture and trade with regions as far east as China and as far west as the Mediterranean basin
- The consolidation of the social traditions of patriarchal families and caste distinctions, the latter becoming more elaborate with the appearance of subcastes called *jati*, which were usually based on occupation
- The emergence and spread of salvation-based religions: Jainism, Buddhism, and popular Hinduism

### **Chapter Outline**

#### **I. The fortunes of empire in classical India**

- A. The Mauryan dynasty and the temporary unification of India
  - 1. Magadha kingdom filled power vacuum left by withdrawal of Alexander of Macedon
  - 2. Chandragupta Maurya began conquest in 320s B.C.E.
    - a. Founded Maurya dynasty stretching from Bactria to Ganges
    - b. Kautilya's advice manual, *Arthashastra*, outlined administrative methods
  - 3. Ashoka Maurya (reigned 268-232 B.C.E.)--peak of empire
    - a. Conquered the kingdom of Kalinga, 260 B.C.E.
    - b. Ruled through tightly organized bureaucracy
    - c. Established capital at Pataliputra
    - d. Policies were written on rocks or pillars
    - e. Empire declined after his death because of financial problems
- B. The revival of empire under the Guptas
  - 1. Greek-speaking Bactrians ruled in northwest India for two centuries
  - 2. Kushans (nomads from Central Asia) conquered and ruled, 1-300 C.E.
    - a. High point was Emperor Kashika, 78-103 C.E.
    - b. Crucial role in Silk Road trading network
  - 3. The Gupta dynasty, founded by Chandra Gupta (375-415 C.E.)
    - a. Smaller and more decentralized than Maurya
    - b. Invasion of White Huns weakened the empire
    - c. After the fifth century C.E., Gupta dynasty continued in name only
    - d. Large regional kingdoms dominated political life in India

#### **II. Economic development and social distinctions**

- A. Towns and trade
  - 1. Towns dotted the India countryside after 600 B.C.E.
    - a. Towns provided manufactured products and luxury goods
    - b. Active marketplaces, especially along Ganges
  - 2. Trade with Persia, China, Indian Ocean basin, Indonesia, southeast Asia, Mediterranean basin
- B. Family life and the caste system
  - 1. Gender relations: patriarchal families, female subordination, child marriage
  - 2. Development of caste system
    - a. With trade and commerce new social groups of artisans, craftsmen, and merchants appeared
    - b. These social groups functioned as sub castes, or *jati*
    - c. Vaishyas and shudras saw unprecedented wealth
    - d. Old beliefs and values of early Aryan society became increasingly irrelevant

### III. Religions of salvation in classical India

- A. Jainism and the challenge to the established cultural order
  - 1. Vardhamana Mahavira (Jina) founded Jain religion in 5th century B.C.E.
  - 2. Jainist doctrine and ethics
    - a. Inspired by the Upanishads: everything in universe has a soul
    - b. Striving to purify one's selfish behavior to attain a state of bliss
    - c. Principle of ahimsa, nonviolence toward all living things
    - d. Too demanding, not a practical alternative to the cult of the brahmins
  - 3. Appeal of Jainism
    - a. Social implication: individual souls equally participated in ultimate reality
    - b. Jains did not recognize social hierarchies of caste and jati
- B. Early Buddhism
  - 1. Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 B.C.E.) became the Buddha
    - a. Gave up his comfortable life to search for cause of suffering
    - b. Received enlightenment under the bo tree
    - c. First sermon about 528 B.C.E. at the Deer Park of Sarnath
    - d. Organized followers into a community of monks
  - 2. Buddhist doctrine: the dharma
    - a. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are the way to end suffering
    - b. Suffering is caused by desire
    - c. Religious goal: personal salvation, or nirvana, a state of perfect spiritual independence
  - 3. Appeal of Buddhism
    - a. Appealed strongly to members of lower castes because it did not recognize social hierarchies of castes and jati
    - b. Was less demanding than Jainism, which made it more popular
    - c. Used vernacular tongues, not Sanskrit
    - d. Holy sites venerated by pilgrims
    - e. The monastic organizations--extremely efficient at spreading the Buddhist message and winning converts to the faith
  - 4. Ashoka converted and became important patron of Buddhism
- C. Mahayana Buddhism
  - 1. Early Buddhism made heavy demands on individuals
  - 2. Development of Buddhism between 3rd century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E.
    - a. Buddha became a god
    - b. The notion of bodhisatva--"an enlightened being"
    - c. Monasteries began to accept gifts from wealthy individuals
    - d. These changes became known as Mahayana Buddhism
    - e. Educational institutions (like Nalanda) promoted new faith
- D. The emergence of popular Hinduism
  - 1. The epics Mahabharata, a secular poem revised by brahman scholars to honor the god Vishnu, the preserver of the world Ramayana, a secular story of Rama and Sita, was changed into a Hindu story
  - 2. The Bhagavad Gita
    - a. A short poetic work: dialogue between Vishnu and warrior
    - b. Illustrated expectations of Hinduism and promise of salvation
  - 3. Hindu ethics
    - a. Achieve salvation through meeting caste responsibilities
    - b. Lead honorable lives in the world
  - 4. Hinduism gradually replaced Buddhism in India