

## CHAPTER 5

# LITERATURE, ART, MUSIC, AND DANCE

**A**ncient India's culture is rich and varied. Foremost is its literature, which has survived for millennia. Other creative endeavors, including art and dance, have also stood the test of time.

Writing on the Kanheri Caves, near Mumbai, India, was inscribed between the 100s BCE and the 900s CE.

## LANGUAGE

Artifacts such as seals show the Indus people used a system of symbols for their written language. Researchers have recovered almost 4,200 items with the writing. The characters number in the hundreds and were written from right to left. Most items with symbols are very small. The longest string of characters, 17, appeared on an item measuring only one square inch (6.5 sq cm).<sup>1</sup> No one has deciphered the Indus writing system.

Sanskrit, developed later, holds a prominent position in India's history. It is part of the Indo-European language group, grammatically similar to Greek and Latin, which are part of the same group. Sanskrit is still spoken in India today. In the 400s BCE, grammarian Panini laid out the structure of the language in the *Astadhyayi*, which means "eight chapters." His book defines classical Sanskrit's grammar, including nouns, pronouns, and verbs. Through history, people have written Sanskrit using a variety of systems, with scripts varying by region.

## LITERATURE

The peoples of ancient India produced an abundance of literature—most of it written in Sanskrit. Much of it is religious, particularly Hindu. The *Vedas*, an assortment of texts written during the Vedic period, have also provided the world with considerable information about life at that time.



The Vedas are still in print in multiple languages and read in India and around the world.

*Veda* is a Sanskrit word meaning “knowledge.” The *Vedas* contain a wealth of material that was initially passed along orally, spoken by one generation to the next. The material is divided into several collections. Much of the content developed from hymns about sacrifice, which honor the Hindu gods the Indo-Aryans worshiped. The *Vedas* address magic as well, providing charms and spells for Indo-Aryan priests.

The first four Vedic texts feature collections of hymns known as the Samhitas. The *Rigveda*, “Knowledge of Verses,” is the oldest Vedic Samhita, dating to approximately 1200 BCE. Its ten books contain 1,028 hymns, which cover a variety of topics. “The Waters of Life” acknowledges the importance of water:

*Waters, you are the ones who bring us the life force.*

*Help us to find nourishment so that we may look upon great joy.*

*Let us share in the most delicious sap that you have, as if you were loving mothers.<sup>2</sup>*

The *Yajurveda*, “Knowledge of the Sacrifice,” has mantras for a priest to recite when leading a sacrificial ritual. The *Samaveda*, “Knowledge of the Chants,” contains verses for chanting. The fourth Samhita, the *Atharvaveda*, “Knowledge of the Fire Priest,” has information on magic. All four Samhitas of the *Vedas* address more than religion. Other topics include philosophy, mathematics, medicine, science, and yoga.

Additional Vedic texts came after the first four *Vedas*. The *Brahmanas*, written in approximately 900 BCE, address prayer and rituals for the top members of society. The *Aranyakas*, “Forest Books,” followed. These contain understanding that can be obtained only through being alone in a forest.

The *Upanishads*, probably written between 600 BCE and 100 BCE, were the last of the *Vedas* the Indo-Aryans wrote. Topics covered include philosophy, religion, and the origin of the universe.

## POETRY

Ancient India's extensive collection of writing includes two great epic poems: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Both are in Sanskrit, and both describe a battle of good versus evil. The *Ramayana*, "Romance of Rama," is the older of the two great poems. It began as an oral story that may date as far back as 1500 BCE. The poet Valmiki wrote down the story sometime after 300 BCE.

The *Ramayana* tells the story of Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, a popular Hindu god. Through its approximately 24,000 couplets, which are divided among seven books, the *Ramayana* teaches values such as devotion, duty, morality, and valor.

The *Mahabharata*, "Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty," is considerably longer. Its 18 books contain

## Kalidasa

Kalidasa may have been India's most prolific writer. He wrote poetry and dramas in Sanskrit during the 400s CE, during the time of the Guptas. He wrote at least six works: three dramas, two epic poems, and a lyric poem. *Abhijnanashakuntala*, "The Recognition of Shakuntala," is his best-known drama. It explains how King Dushyanta seduced Shakuntala, a nymph, and then rejected her and their child, Bharata. Ultimately, the family is reunited in heaven. Some scholars believe it is the best work of Indian literature of all time.

# Dharma

Dharma is an important idea in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Its meaning varies among the three religions. In Hinduism, dharma is the religious and moral law that guides behavior. In Buddhism, dharma is the universal truth that all individuals share at all times, especially the ideas of karma and samsara. People have interpreted the word *dharma* in Buddhism many ways, including “law, truth, doctrine, gospel, teaching, norm, and true idea.”<sup>4</sup>

In Jainism, dharma is moral virtue. For Jains, dharma is also a substance, an immortal and infinite life force that gives organisms the ability to move.

220,000 lines, which make it the longest poem in the world.<sup>3</sup> Legend attributes its writing to Vyasa, a wise man. Vyasa wrote the great poem approximately 100 years after Valmiki wrote the *Ramayana*.

The *Mahabharata* tells the story of two groups of sons in a royal family as the cousins fight for power. The text is valuable to Hindus and non-Hindus alike. It teaches dharma, or morality. It also provides historical information about the religion, including its development from 400 BCE to 200 CE.

## ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Ancient Indians also expressed their beliefs and stories through their visual art. The inhabitants of India have been artists for hundreds of thousands of years. Paintings such as those in Bhimbetka, in central India, date to prehistoric times. People of the Indus civilization worked with clay. They drew figures—human and animal—and symbols into their now famous seals and other earthenware.

The people of ancient India were also sculptors. They modeled simple shapes, such as carts, cattle, and monkeys, with terra-cotta. The female form was popular, too, particularly in Indus art.

As Buddhism became more popular in India, it became the focus of much of India's early art and architecture. Some of Ashoka's edicts were inscribed on pillars adorned with animal shapes. He also had stupas built or restored, honoring his belief in Buddhism by helping preserve remains of the Buddha.

During the second and first centuries BCE, Indian artists honored the Buddha in Ajanta in west-central India. There, they carved caves to serve as temples, adorning them with monuments and paintings of the Buddha's life.

The Buddhist focus continued during the beginning of the new millennium. Artists in the first, second, and third centuries CE concentrated on building more stupas. Their carvings told stories. The style was ornate and more complex.

Later, in the 400s and 500s, during the Gupta period, artists added to Ajanta, creating more caves and artwork. Painters worked almost exclusively on plaster.

# A CLOSER LOOK

## THE CAVES OF AJANTA

Near India's center, 29 caves serve as a record of the country's artistic development. Artists carved the caves into the Sahyadri Hills in west-central India. Skilled carvers shaped the first caves in the 100s BCE, creating five sanctuaries. The design is similar to that of a basilica, with a long hall and side aisles separated by pillars. Artists decorated the caves with sculptures and paintings depicting the Buddha's life.

Craftsmen added additional caves during the 400s and 500s CE. The additions served as monasteries, becoming home to approximately 200 Buddhist monks and artisans. The people who crafted the newer caves based the design on that of the earlier structures, adding to them. Ajanta's sculptures and paintings are an exceptional example of Buddhist art and mark the start of classical Indian art.





## MUSIC

Visual art provides clues to music in ancient India. Statues from the Indus period show instruments such as drums and a bow-shaped harp. Like other art from the time, music during the Vedic era focused on religion, serving two purposes: to please the gods and as part of sacrificial rituals. The *Rigveda* includes spoken hymns. The *Samaveda*, “Knowledge of the Chants,” is a Hindu book of songs. Its hymns are chanted, using seven musical notes. Vedic music includes pieces for individuals and groups.

Literature reveals some of music’s history, but few specific details are mentioned. The *Ramayana* discusses a lute. The *Mahabharata* details a musical scale with seven notes. And both Buddhist and Jain texts mention singing.

During the Gupta era, in approximately 400 CE, a book of music known as the *Dattilam* was created by the sage Dattila Muni. It describes a system for music that includes notes and how to arrange them.

## DANCE

Like other forms of expression, dance often related closely to religion. Dance in ancient India dates back at least 4,500 years. Artwork and Vedic literature, including the *Mahabharata*, mentions dance. Ancient Indian dance was a form of worship. It reflected *rasa*, which are nine emotions: anger, compassion,

courage, disgust, fear, happiness, serenity, sorrow, and wonder. India's classical dance styles have existed for more than 2,000 years. One of the oldest is the *Bharatanatyam*, which remains a popular dance. The dance is described in the *Natya Shastra*, "Treatise of Dance," which was written between 100 BCE and 300 CE. Historically, the dance was performed by a single dancer, who would move her body into different statue-like poses.

The *Dancing Girl* statue excavated in Mohenjo-Daro is one of the earliest examples of Indian dance.





## CHAPTER 6

# ONE LAND, MANY FAITHS

Religion has been an integral part of India's culture since its beginning. In addition to goddess figurines, the Indus seals reveal a collection of figures, including animals such as the bull, elephant, and tiger, as well as trees and gods in yoga postures. Some drawings are similar to the *linga*, a symbol of the Hindu god Shiva. Others show what appears to be Shiva with

Shiva, depicted as a modern statue in Karnataka, India, is one of the major gods of Hinduism.

three faces and a headdress with horns. In addition, religious figures appear in India's literature, music, and art. Today, Hinduism is the religion most commonly associated with ancient India. India's other well-known religions, Buddhism and Jainism, were reactions to Hindu beliefs.

## THE ROOTS OF HINDUISM

The religion people refer to as Hinduism began more than 3,000 years ago during the Vedic era. Unlike many religions, Hinduism does not have a single founder. Rather, it developed over time, shaped from existing religious practices and beliefs.

The Indo-Aryans practiced Vedic Hinduism. The *Rigveda* is the oldest literary source related to Hinduism. The ancient Indians wrote it in approximately 300 BCE, though they shared its material orally more than 1,000 years earlier. The *Vedas* detail numerous gods—initially, 33—which these early Hindus worshiped. The deities represented elements of the natural world. Agni was the god of fire. Varuna and Vayu represented thunder and wind. Surya and Usha were the gods of sun and dawn.

The *Rigveda* features a series of poems that outline a system of sacrifice. Sacrifice was an important part of Vedic Hinduism. In *homa*, the fire-worship ritual, believers sacrificed animals, including goats, oxen, sheep, and sometimes horses. The worshipers offered their gods the meat from the

sacrifices, along with bread, butter, milk, and soma, a beverage. In return, the gods supposedly granted worshipers whatever they wanted, such as long life or victory in battle.

In the 500s BCE, Brahmanism developed from Vedic Hinduism. This religion's name comes from Brahma, the almighty creator, and Brahmins, the highest caste. The idea of Brahma emerged in approximately 500 BCE. According to myth, Brahma came from a golden egg and created the planet Earth and everything on it. When depicted, Brahma usually has four faces, which reflect the four *Vedas* and the four social classes, among other things in Vedic Hinduism.

A page from the *Rigveda* features important Hindu hymns.



## Ancient Rituals

Discoveries in the Indus Valley indicate temple rituals, ritual bathing at Mohenjo-Daro, and animal sacrifice at Kalibangan in northwest India. The Indus people followed special customs when burying their dead. They placed coffins in brick chambers with the deceased's head pointing north. Before burying a deceased person, the living would accessorize the body with ornaments. The living also provided those who died with many clay pots. The pottery varied in size, shape, and design.

The early Hindus believed in other gods as well. These deities lived in other worlds people cannot see. Eventually, Shiva, the destroyer, and Vishnu, the preserver, gained prominence when they joined Brahma in a triumvirate, or group of three. Vishnu encompasses several lesser deities as well as local heroes through avatars, or human or animal forms of gods. In approximately 500 CE, Brahma's status as a major god began to decline. Hinduism has many beliefs based on Brahmanism, including a single supreme being: God.

While Hinduism has existed for a few thousand years, the present-day version is quite different from the religion that began in ancient India. Hinduism has evolved, reflecting ideas and beliefs of the people through the ages. Upinder Singh, history professor at the University of Delhi, wrote about the complex religion:

*Modern-day Hinduism differs from other major world religions in many important respects, in that it has no founder, no fixed canon which embodies its major beliefs and practices, and no organized priesthood.*



*It is also marked by a great variety in beliefs, practices, sects, and traditions. Some scholars argue that Hinduism is not so much a religion as a set of socio-cultural practices; others argue that it is inextricably linked to the existence of caste; and still others hold that we should talk of Hindu religions in the plural rather than the singular.<sup>1</sup>*

## BUDDHISM

By the 500s BCE, when Siddhartha Gautama lived, people were questioning Vedic Hinduism and Brahmanism, particularly sacrificial rituals. New schools of thought emerged, including Buddhism.

The Buddha disagreed with sacrifice. He deemed the Vedic custom cruel because of the killing. He also opposed the caste system, promoting equality instead. The Buddha did not promote a god or gods. No deity would provide salvation; knowledge and meditation would.

Buddhists seek nirvana, which translates to “blowing out.” Followers seek to blow out, or end, hatred, greed, and any delusions they may have. They strive for a more positive being, which will come from endless compassion, deep spirituality, and unending peace.

## Om

In Hinduism, *Om* is a sacred sound. *Om* is pronounced like the word *home* without the *h*, and it has great meaning in Hindu mythology. According to Hindu belief, its vibration holds together the heavens. *Om* came before the universe and formed the gods. This holiest of Hindu sounds begins and ends its prayers.

## The Death of Buddhism in India

While Buddhism began in ancient India, it did not persist as long as it did in other regions. Followers exalted the Buddha into the realm of god, making him much more than the human being he was. Because India had so many gods, idolizing the Buddha caused him to become more ordinary. He became more myth than reality. Eventually, Buddhism receded in India, engulfed by Hinduism. However, the religion had traveled beyond India to other parts of Asia, where it thrived and continued to spread.

Buddhism experienced a great period of growth during the reign of Ashoka, from 272 BCE to 231 BCE. Ashoka converted to Buddhism and gave the religion greater recognition than it had previously. He also influenced the faith's growth, extending it beyond India. However, within a few hundred years, Buddhism greatly declined in India, although it prospered in other parts of Asia. Buddhism experienced a revival in India during the Gupta period, thanks to support from the Guptas, but then it experienced another decline that included destruction of Buddhist holy places. The first known surviving stone images of Hinduism date to the end of the Mauryan era. By the time the Guptas emerged in 320 CE, Hinduism had emerged as the most prominent religion.

## JAINISM

Like Buddhism, Jainism emerged as a rejection of Vedic practices, particularly animal sacrifice. This renunciation is the religion's central belief, *ahimsa*: do no harm to any living thing.

A man named Vardhamana founded Jainism. He lived during the time of the Buddha, from 599 BCE to 527 BCE. He was also known as Mahavira. Like the Buddha, Mahavira was born of nobility and chose to give up physical comforts for a simpler life.

Jainism has three guiding principles: right belief, right conduct, and right knowledge. Each follower agrees to the five *mahavratas*, or “great vows”: nonviolence, honesty, no stealing, sexual restraint, and nonattachment to possessions.

Those who practice Jainism, Jains, show their belief in nonviolence through their diet. They are strict vegetarians. In addition to practicing vegetarianism, Jains perform six rites each day. These include meditation, praying, and sitting or standing motionless for periods of time.

Jainism is highly ascetic. Mahavira lived his belief in doing no harm to any living thing. He allowed mosquitoes to feed on him and dogs to bite him. He gave up clothing because beings had to suffer in its creation. He died as a result of starving himself.

Mahavira’s followers wrote down his words and memorized them to share with future followers. Jainism risked being lost because its vow of nonpossession meant its monks and nuns could not keep books, including those about their own faith. Because they were also not allowed to write,

they could not record the teachings of Jainism. During the Gupta period, Jainism experienced a revival. In 460 CE, a council of Jains met and had their scriptures written down, preserving the religion.

## KARMA AND TRANSMIGRATION

In the 500s BCE, as Buddhism and Jainism emerged, followers of Brahmanism advocated messages similar to those of these new faiths: asceticism, meditation, and the ancient tradition of yoga. The goal of such practices was release from the physical, material world and from *samsara*, the cycle of life, death, and transmigration, or rebirth.

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism share many common beliefs. For example, all three believe in cycles, rather than in beginning and end points. The religions believe the universe is in a state of constant change, creating, preserving, and dissolving.

Karma and transmigration are two other features of all three religions. Karma is the idea that how a person lives will determine his or her life. If one thinks, says, or does good things, good fortune will come in return. But if one thinks, says, or does bad things, misfortune will result for that person. Transmigration, also called reincarnation, is the belief a person is reborn repeatedly to resolve all karmas. The soul evolves with each life.

When the soul has finished evolving, it is freed from the cycle of rebirth. Ahisma is another important part of the three faiths. It comes from the belief that all life is precious and sacred. It is closely tied to the ideas of karma and transmigration.

## Other Religions

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism were not the only religions in ancient India. Other practices existed. Some of them were quite different from these three faiths. For example, Goshala Maskariputra founded Ajivika at approximately the same time as Buddhism and Jainism emerged. Its name means “following the ascetic way of life,” and followers of Ajivika practiced simple living rather than pursuing any particular objective. They believed

in predetermination, the idea that the events of their lives were determined before birth.

The teacher Pakuda Katyayana offered another option. He preached that a person’s soul is above good and evil and cannot be affected by them. The philosopher Ajita Kesakambalin encouraged materialism, believing there was no afterlife and death was the end for all souls.



## CHAPTER 7

# MATHEMATICS AND MEDICINE

**W**hile religions evolved and thrived, the minds of ancient India were also achieving great successes in mathematics. As far back as the Indus civilization, the people were skilled mathematicians. The Indus people created cities such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro using uniform bricks. The uniformity was mathematical, with bricks following a strict ratio

Ancient Indian architects designed cities, such as Harappa, using advanced mathematical techniques.

of 4 to 2 to 1.<sup>1</sup> The length was twice the size of the width, which was twice the size of the thickness.

In addition, these ancient Indians used a system of weights. Archaeologists have unearthed scales that show decimal divisions. Sizes correspond to several ratios: 0.05, 0.1, 0.2, 0.5, 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500.<sup>2</sup>

## SKILLED AND ORIGINAL MATHEMATICIANS

The *Vedas* reveal further mathematical understanding. The people of the Vedic period understood the place value system. That is, they knew 10 is ten

times greater than 1 and 100 is ten times greater than 10 and so on. The *Vedas* designate names for each place—*daza* for tens place, *zata* for hundreds place, *sahasra* for thousands place. These place designations went all the way up to the fifty-third power, or 53 zeroes.

More mathematical breakthroughs came about toward the end of the Gupta period, thanks to the work of scholar Aryabhata I. His works and life are the earliest by an Indian mathematician available

"Like the crest on the peacock's head,  
Like the gem in the cobra's hood  
So stands mathematics at the head of all the sciences."<sup>3</sup>

—*Sanskrit text Vedanga Jyotisa, circa 300s BCE*

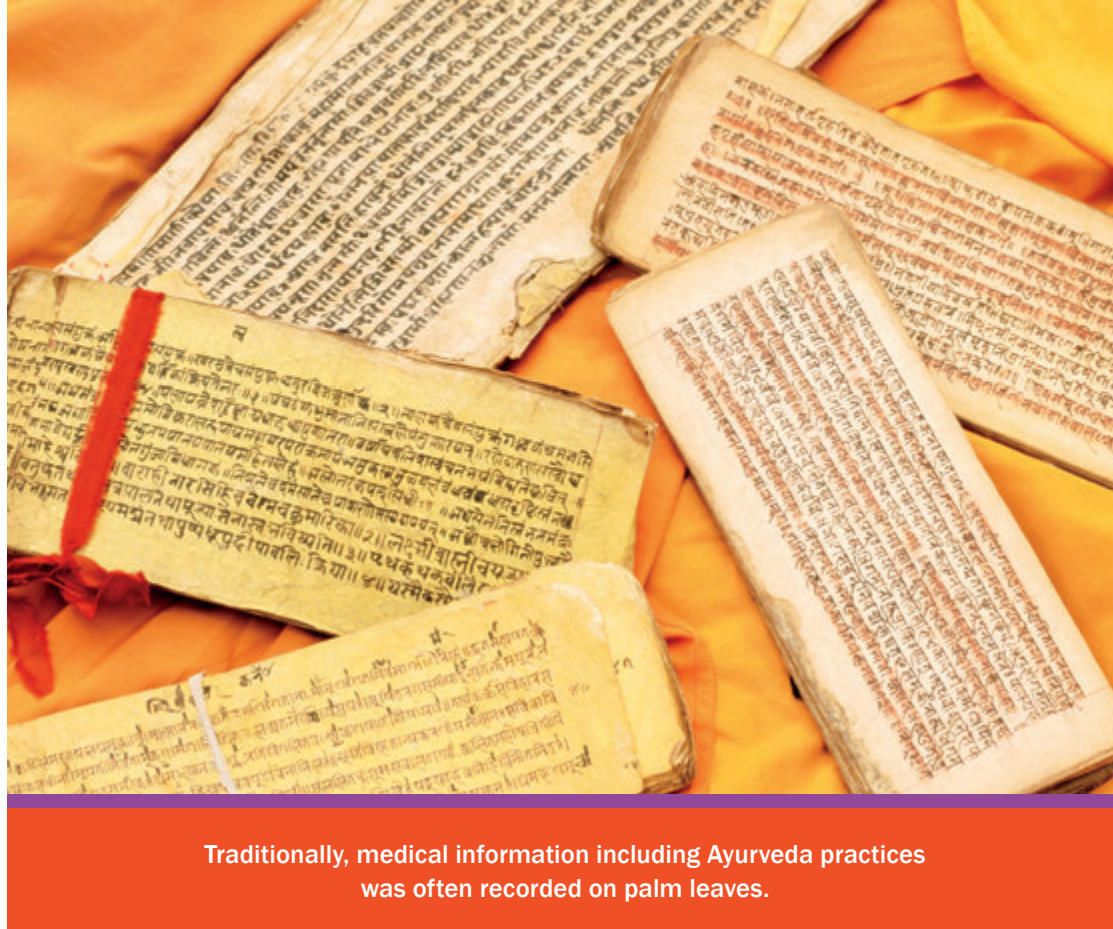


to current scholars. In approximately 499 CE, he wrote about astronomy and mathematics in *Aryabhatiya* and *Aryabhatasiddhanta*, the latter of which has been lost. In *Aryabhatasiddhanta*, he treats midnight as the start of the day. He is one of the first to do so. While *Aryabhatasiddhanta* itself no longer exists, its ideas continued in later works. Among other things, Aryabhata provided formulas for determining square and cube roots. He also discussed geometry, including pi. Another of Aryabhata's achievements was calculating the length of the solar year.

## MEDICINE

In addition to their mathematical advancements, the ancient Indians developed two systems of medicine: Ayurveda and Siddha. Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word that translates to “meaning of life.” The *Vedas* were the first text to mention Ayurveda, which its writers believed to have come from the gods. The *Vedas* note treatments for a variety of physical ailments, including cough, diarrhea, fever, seizures, skin issues, and tumors.

Ayurveda believes five elements combine to form people: air, earth, fire, water, and ether, or space. When two or more of these elements combine, humans react in specific ways. For example, the combination of earth and water affects growth. Ayurveda also believes each person has a unique



Traditionally, medical information including Ayurveda practices was often recorded on palm leaves.

balance of these combinations. When a person's balance is off, Ayurveda suggests ways to restore it, including activity, diet, and massage.

Siddha originated at approximately the same time as Ayurveda and has many similarities. The Siddha system began in southern India. Legend says Siddha came from the Hindu god Shiva. Like Ayurveda, Siddha believes in five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether.

Siddha focuses on balancing air, fire, and water, believing their imbalance causes problems. Practitioners rely on the pulse for diagnosis.

Treatment may take different paths. In Siddha, *prana*, or breathing, is the most important function of the body. Controlled breathing is intended to aid healing. *Varma* is another treatment. It involves manipulating *varmam*, points where blood vessels, bone, muscle, nerves, and tendons meet.

Like Ayurveda, Siddha looks to nature for healing through herbs. Siddha differs from Ayurveda in that it relies on combining herbs with minerals, especially mercury and sulfur. Siddha uses animal products, too. A treatment might contain an animal's blood, bones, brain, horns, liver, or skull. Practitioners also use reptile tissue in some medicines.

## YOGA

Yoga is an ancient Indian tradition that is still popular today. When Siddhartha Gautama sat beneath the Bodhi tree to ponder life on his journey

## The Power of Turmeric

Ayurveda advocates dozens of herbs to improve health and wellness, but turmeric is one of the most frequently mentioned. The herb is part of the ginger family and native to India. The spice is an orange-yellow color and has a distinct flavor. It is made by boiling the turmeric plant's roots and then drying them in the sun for five to seven days. Ayurveda values turmeric for its antiseptic, or germ-destroying, qualities, which are useful in treating people internally and externally. Modern practitioners still prescribe the herb for a variety of different ailments, including Alzheimer's disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and wounds.



to enlightenment, he did so in *padmasana*, a yoga pose commonly referred to as the lotus position. Yoga's existence extends well beyond the Buddha's time. It is at least as old as Mohenjo-Daro. Some of the seals discovered in the ancient city depict people in a variety of yoga positions, including *padmasana*.

*Yoga* means “union” or “yoking” in Sanskrit. It is a system of philosophy and healing that relies on the mind and body working together. The ancient Indian writer Patanjali, who lived in the 100s BCE, wrote about

According to Buddhist beliefs, Buddha sat in the lotus yoga position in his final step before becoming the Buddha, as depicted by this modern statue.

yoga in the *Yoga-sutras*. This is the earliest known literature about yoga. Previously, it had been passed down orally.

Yoga has eight stages. The second and third make up the yoga people associate with the modern practice. Asana, “seat,” is a series of body positions that increase strength and flexibility. *Pranayama*, “breath control,” consists of exercises that focus on breathing. The other stages focus on ethics and the mind.

While many practitioners today use yoga as simply a form of exercise, the people of ancient India sought more. By mastering yoga’s stages, a practitioner would gain control of different aspects of being, which was important in obtaining spiritual goals. Siddhartha practiced yoga on his path to enlightenment.



## CHAPTER 8

# MILITARY MIGHT

The people of ancient India were religious and thoughtful. However, their focus on spiritual growth and understanding life and all it encompasses does not mean they were not warriors. Ancient India's history includes skilled military leaders and battles that involved tactics never before seen by enemies.

Armored elephants were a key resource used by ancient Indian warriors.

## INDUS CLUES

Scholars know little about fighting during the Indus period. Writing is almost nonexistent, and researchers have not deciphered the limited script found on seals. But researchers are not without clues.

Archaeologists have unearthed a variety of weapons. Some of them could have been used for hunting. Weapons include axes, daggers, knives, maces, slings, spears, and bows and arrows. Maces had a long handle made of wood and a head made of alabaster, limestone, or sandstone. Daggers and knives were made of bronze or copper.

### Horses

Horses were not part of life for the early Indus people. The Indo-Aryans likely brought them to India. This group valued the beasts, using them in battle, but they were important in other ways as well. Horses were a symbol of royalty. Horses also played a part in sacred practices. The Aryans identified them with the sun and sacrificed the animals in rituals.

## VEDIC FIGHTING

During the Vedic era, Indo-Aryans introduced new fighting practices to India. The group used weapons made of iron. The metal is stronger than bronze or copper.

The many kingdoms that existed during the Vedic age also put chariots to use as they fought each other. Chariots were large platforms on four wheels. Four to six horses pulled each one, which carried two to six men. Men drove the chariots



into their enemies' armies, while archers on board showered the enemy with arrows. Other men on board had spears and protected the bowmen from attack.

In addition to spears and bows and arrows, Vedic warriors used axes, javelins, slings, and swords. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* note the *pasa* and the *sudarshana chakra*. The *pasa* was a noose in the shape of a triangle with iron balls that gave it weight. Soldiers used it to strangle the enemy. The *sudarshana chakra* was a disk with a sharp edge for throwing at opponents.

In addition to using new weapons, the Vedic people established a new organization for the military. Armies were structured into four parts: infantry, elephants, chariots, and archers. These parts were organized into intricate formations. The armies of Vedic India took to battlefields in formations with names such as the Fish, the Needle, and the Wheel. Some formations were very detailed. For example, the Lotus placed soldiers in the shape of a flower, with archers at the center, surrounded by members of the cavalry and infantry in formations like petals. The Eagle followed the shape

## Chariots

The chariot was a popular vehicle in ancient times, including in ancient India. Chariots had two or four wheels. Initially, animals such as donkeys pulled the vehicles. Horses became work animals in approximately 2000 BCE, and they were faster than donkeys. A chariot pulled by a horse could reach approximately 15 miles per hour (24 kmh). Ancient Indians used chariots to hunt and for sport.

of the bird. The best troops and war elephants would form the beak and head. Fighters in chariots and on horses formed the wings. Reserve troops made up the body.

## A MIGHTY MAURYAN MILITARY

When Chandragupta united the kingdoms of India into its first empire in 322 BCE, he also united their armies. He used them to build and expand the empire. The Greeks that Alexander had led onto the subcontinent

### War Elephants

Elephants have been part of Indian life for millennia. The subcontinent's earliest civilization, the Indus, hunted elephants and may have tamed them. The first mention of war elephants in India is in the epic poems *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Greek writings first mention ancient Indians using elephants in war in the 400s BCE. Elephants fought alongside chariots at first and eventually replaced the vehicles. A person known as a *mahout* served as an elephant's caretaker and driver. Before going into battle, the mahout would decorate the elephant's head and trunk by

painting geometric shapes in bright colors on them. In 326 BCE, Alexander the Great encountered war elephants for the first time in his battle with Porus at the Hydaspes River. Alexander was impressed, saying, "I see at last a danger that matches my courage. It is at once with wild beasts and men of uncommon mettle that the contest now lies."<sup>1</sup> Indians used elephants in battle well beyond ancient times. India was the last nation to use war elephants, relying on the massive creatures in warfare until the 1800s CE.

had been withdrawing following the great leader's death the year before. Those who stayed joined the local culture.

The Mauryan Empire relied on people from across the land—and from all castes—to complete its military ranks. Warriors from central and western India made up the bulk of the military's soldiers. Other kingdoms provided troops only during times of war. Kingdoms in southern India provided money rather than people.

The Mauryan military continued the four-part structure of the Vedic era: infantry, elephants, chariots, and archers. The archers made up the biggest of the four groups. The military improved weaponry and armor. One improvement was a protective, miniature fortlike structure that went on the elephants' backs. From there, soldiers would attack their enemies. Weapons included bamboo bows, javelins, spears, and tridents. Elephants also carried weapons, including a sword designed for their trunks. At its largest size, the empire had

## Battling Alexander

In 326 BCE, after defeating Persia, Alexander the Great set his sights on India. At the Hydaspes River, the famed Greek military leader met Porus, who ruled the Punjab region. Porus had an army of archers, chariots, elephants, and infantry. The archers used bamboo bows that were six feet (2 m) long and long arrows made of cane.<sup>2</sup> The mighty elephants wore bronze masks and were a new challenge for the Greeks, but Porus and his army were no match for Alexander and his superior military leadership. Porus's infantry sought protection by huddling near the elephants, but the beasts were wounded and angry and trampled people nearby. Those not crushed were left to face Alexander's cavalry, which overpowered them.



750,000 soldiers and more than 9,000 elephants.<sup>3</sup>

## GUPTA POWER

The end of the Mauryan Empire led to a fractured India. Kingdoms fought one another, as well as invaders from outside. Ancient India had no single organized military, until the rise of the Gupta Empire in the 300s CE.

The military of the Gupta Empire was similar to those of previous eras. It had four parts. However, instead of chariots, it relied on a cavalry. The military armed these foot soldiers with lances or swords. Archers remained an important part of the Gupta military. Their strength was improved by an advancement in bow design. Warriors from the upper castes had bows made of steel. They were stronger than

Shields provided additional protection for ancient Indian warriors. They varied in shape and decoration.

bamboo bows. With them, an archer could shoot farther and puncture thick armor. Unlike bamboo, steel would not warp in the humidity of some regions of the subcontinent. However, archers of the lower castes still used bamboo longbows. Most used bamboo arrows, which were often set on fire before shooting. Other fighting instruments included daggers and swords.

Soldiers from the upper castes and the best fighters had other, better equipment, including steel weapons such as broadswords. They had chain mail, too, but it was challenging to wear in the hot environment of India.

Just like the mighty Mauryan military at its peak, the Gupta Empire had 750,000 soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Tools such as the catapult gave them an even greater advantage over their enemies. And the expansion of the empire proves the Gupta military's knowledge of battle techniques.

“The Persians are famed for their archers, the Turks for their horsemen, and India for its armies.”<sup>5</sup>

—*Arab proverb*



## CHAPTER 9

# ANCIENT INDIA'S LEGACY

The end of the Gupta Empire in 550 CE marked the end of the ancient period of India's history. The following centuries would continue to bring changes, including rule by Middle Eastern nations and Europeans. However, time and outside influences did not diminish the culture that had developed on the subcontinent through great periods such as the Indus,

Many of the aspects of ancient India, including religion, art, and architecture, have carried through into modern Indian culture.

“Every generation in India, for over 4,000 years, has bequeathed something, if only a very little, to posterity. No land on earth has such a long cultural continuity as India. . . . In India, the brahman still repeats in his daily worship Vedic hymns composed over 3,000 years ago, and tradition recalls heroic chieftains and the great battles fought by them at about the same time. In respect of the length of continuous tradition, China comes second to India and Greece makes a poor third.”<sup>1</sup>

—A. L. Basham, a historian specializing in South Asia

Vedic, Mauryan, and Gupta. Rather, these changes simply added to India’s rich culture and history.

## THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA

The generations following India’s golden age saw leaders come and go. The 700s CE brought the first of many Middle Eastern invaders. Later, a string of Muslim empires known as the Delhi Sultanate controlled much of northern India from 1206 to 1526.

The Mughal Empire (1526–1858) followed. Its rulers were descended from the Mongols. The era was relatively peaceful, and culture thrived. One of India’s landmarks, the Taj Mahal, was born during this era. The emperor, Shah Jahan, built it in Agra as a mausoleum for his wife. Construction took almost 20 years.

All the while, trade continued between India and other countries. Portuguese traders arrived by sea in India at the end of the 1400s. Other Europeans followed in the 1600s, including the Dutch, French, and British. The British arrival in particular would have a lasting effect on India.





During the British rule of India, battles frequently broke out between the native Indians and the British colonists.

The British East India Company came to India in 1608. Its owners were interested in goods such as jewels, silk, and spices. Labor was inexpensive, which encouraged expansion. The company set up factories.

## The Caste System Today

The caste system continues to divide India's people today. The names of the four main classes have not changed, though some of their areas of work reflect modernity. Brahmins focus on scriptural education and teaching. Kshatriyas are dedicated to public service. The Vaishya form a business caste. The Shudra caste consists of semiskilled and unskilled workers. Untouchables make up a fifth class, which consists of people considered the lowest of society. Today, the castes mingle in business and social situations. However, people rarely marry outside their caste, and a person cannot change his or her caste.

It grew and became successful and powerful, bit by bit, taking over the country. Eventually, the company used force to fight local people who revolted against it. The British government tried to control the company and ultimately disbanded it in 1858, installing a colonial government on the subcontinent.

Direct rule by the British is known as the British Raj. It began in 1858. During that time, the British imposed their customs on Indian society, including the English language. Tea was a major crop, with India providing 59 percent of Britain's supply. However, as the British prospered from exporting tea, the Indian people continued suffering. The poor remained poor, while the British living in India grew richer.

Independence movements began forming in the late 1800s. Finally, in 1947, India gained independence. In the process, it lost part of its northwest territory, which became part of Pakistan.

On January 26, 1950, India became a republic. After centuries of foreign rule, India was independent.

Since gaining its independence, India has warred with Pakistan. Other issues facing the nation have included overpopulation and poverty. However, the country has experienced tremendous economic growth in recent decades, too, becoming a power regionally and globally.

## RELIGIOUS CONTRIBUTIONS

Ancient India's contributions are apparent in India and abroad, and its influence on world religion is undeniable. The Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain belief systems that started so long ago continue. Hinduism is the third-largest religion in the world, with almost 1 billion followers, mostly in South Asia.<sup>2</sup> Almost 81 percent of Indians are Hindu.<sup>3</sup>

Almost 6 percent of the world's population practices Buddhism. Most Buddhists are in Southeast Asia, but the belief system's following outside Asia is growing. Many people in Australia, Europe, North America, and South America follow the teachings of the Buddha.

Jainism has more than 4.5 million followers.<sup>4</sup> Most of them are in India, but Jains also live in Africa, Europe, and North America.



The ancient practice of yoga is thriving in the United States and other parts of the world.

## OLD PRACTICES IN A NEW ERA

India has a short history as a nation and a long history as a people. The Indian culture has continuity unlike any other. It is rich in tradition, religion, artistry, and knowledge, reflecting and building on its impressive and important past. The influence of the Indo-Aryans lives on daily for millions of modern Indians who practice Hinduism. But India's history lives on in other

ways. Yoga exists beyond India's borders. And while the West has its own forms of medicine, Westerners are embracing holistic ideas such as those presented by Ayurveda. In addition, mathematical concepts used in ancient India, such as pi, are alive and well.

India does not simply have a history, it is history. Those who inhabit the subcontinent live that history daily. They shape it and add to it, just as their ancestors did. As the young nation of India moves forward, it does so with an eye toward its past, its people well aware of themselves as a culture millennia old, adept, aware, artistic, and worthy of awe. Its rich, complex story continues to unfold.

## Art and Architecture

*Very few people yet realize how great a debt the art of the world—especially that of the Eastern world—owes to India. It is true to say that without the example of Indian forms and ideas, the arts of the whole of South East Asia, of China, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, and Japan would all have been radically different. . . . So, too, would modern Western art, especially architecture and painting.<sup>5</sup>*

—P. S. Rawson, art historian

# TIMELINE

## 3300 BCE–1700 BCE

The Indus civilization flourishes in northern and central India.

## 1700 BCE–500 BCE

The Vedic civilization is prominent.

## 1500 BCE

The Aryans arrive in India.

## 600 BCE

Sixteen *mahajanapadas*, “great kingdoms,” emerge.

## 500s BCE

The founders of Jainism and Buddhism are born.

## 400 BCE

The *Mahabharata*, the world’s longest poem, is written down.

## 327 BCE

Alexander the Great becomes the first Greek to invade India.

## 321 BCE

Chandragupta Maurya unites India’s kingdoms into its first empire.

## C. 273 BCE–232 BCE

Ashoka leads the Mauryan Empire, spreading his Buddhist beliefs in a collection of edicts.

## 185 BCE

The Mauryan dynasty ends.

## 100s BCE

Artists create the first five caves at Ajanta, which serve as temples.

## C. 100 BCE–300 CE

The *Natya Shastra*, “Treatise of Dance,” is completed.

## 320

The Gupta Empire begins, marking the start of India’s golden age, a time of great artistic expression and advances in mathematics and medicine.

## C. 400

The *Dattilam* details a system for Indian music.

## 400s

Kalidasa writes the *Abhijnanashakuntala*, India’s best literary work.

## 400s AND 500s

Artists create additional caves at Ajanta, creating what becomes classical Indian art.

## 499

Aryabhata I writes about mathematics and astronomy in *Aryabhatiya*.

## 550

The Gupta Empire ends, marking the end of India’s golden age.

# ANCIENT HISTORY

## KEY DATES

- **3300 BCE:** The Indus civilization settled in northern and central India, existing until 1700 BCE.
- **1700 BCE:** The Vedic civilization begins, lasting until 500 BCE.
- **500s BCE:** The founders of Jainism and Buddhism were born.
- **321 BCE–185 BCE:** India's first empire, the Mauryan Empire, existed.
- **320 CE–550 CE:** The Gupta Empire created India's golden age, a time of great artistic expression and advances in mathematics and medicine.

## KEY TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGIES

- The Indus civilization created the first water and sewer systems.
- Ancient Indian warriors improved bow and arrow technology, giving them some of the best archers in the ancient world.
- Ancient Indians built Indus cities, including Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, using uniform bricks.

## LANGUAGE

Sanskrit, which is still spoken today, was the predominant language in ancient India. It is part of the Indo-European languages group, which also contains Greek and Latin.



## IMPACT OF THE INDIAN CIVILIZATION

- Literature and religion highlight ancient India's culture, with the *Vedas* providing important clues to Hinduism's past. Parts of the ancient texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, remain important material to Hindus.
- Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism began on the subcontinent long ago and are practiced there still today, as well as in lands near and far.
- Religion and art combined in the Ajanta caves to create art that remains as evidence of India's golden age. The style ancient Indian artists created is visible today in other Asian countries.

## QUOTE

“Every generation in India, for over 4,000 years, has bequeathed something, if only a very little to posterity. No land on earth has such a long cultural continuity as India. . . . In India, the brahman still repeats in his daily worship Vedic hymns composed over 3,000 years ago, and tradition recalls heroic chieftains and the great battles fought by them at about the same time. In respect of the length of continuous tradition, China comes second to India and Greece makes a poor third.”

—A. L. Basham, a historian specializing in South Asia, *The Illustrated Cultural History of India*

# GLOSSARY

## avatar

In Hinduism, the human or animal form a deity takes to fight an evil on earth.

## Brahma

In Hinduism, the creator god.

## Buddhism

The religion based on the teachings of the Buddha, who advocated pursuing a middle path in life, avoiding the extremes of indulgence and self-denial.

## dharma

In Hinduism, religious or moral law that varies with caste; in Buddhism, the truth of the universe that exists for all people always, particularly, the ideas of karma and rebirth; in Jainism, moral virtue.

## dynasty

A family that controls a country for a long period of time through successive rulers.

## edict

A declaration or order by someone in power.

## ghee

Butter prepared using a process of heating and cooling that results in it being semifluid.

## Hinduism

The main religion in India; it involves worshiping numerous gods and stresses karma and reincarnation.

## Jainism

A disciplined religion that stresses nonviolence; depending on the worshiper, this could be animals or all living things.

## karma

The force that results from a person's thoughts or actions and determines what a person's current or next life will be like.

## patriarchal

Passed down through the male line.

## soapstone

A kind of stone that is soft and feels like soap.

## stupa

A moundlike structure that is a Buddhist shrine, often containing a relic of the Buddha or identifying a sacred location.

## Vedas

The earliest sacred writings of Hinduism.

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### THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Great Russell Street

London WC1B 3DG, United Kingdom

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[http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/asia/ancient\\_south\\_asia.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/asia/ancient_south_asia.aspx)

Room 33 contains objects from India's ancient past, including some from Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism.

### NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI

Janpath and Rajpath Roads

New Delhi, India

011-23792775

<http://www.nationalmuseumindia.gov.in/visiting.asp>

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