

India Empires, 300 B.C.–A.D. 550

First Empires of India

In 321 B.C., Chandragupta Maurya used his army to defeat the king of eastern India. He took the throne and started a dynasty named after him.

Chandragupta, not stopping with eastern India, moved west. In 305 B.C., he began to challenge Seleucus, one of Alexander the Great's generals. The two armies clashed for several years, and eventually Chandragupta won. For the first time, northern India, from west to east, was joined under the rule of one person.

Chandragupta was a harsh ruler. He charged a heavy tax on all the farmers who raised food—one-half of the crop they grew each year. He used the wealth he gained to build a huge army. He created a government that he controlled by carefully choosing officials and keeping a watchful eye on them. He split his empire into four provinces, each ruled by a prince. These areas, in turn, were divided into smaller pieces that were run by members of the government.

We know a great deal about life in Chandragupta's court because Seleucus sent a Greek there as an ambassador. He described the richness of the palace and the beauty of the capital city.

Chandragupta's grandson Asoka took the throne in 269 B.C. and brought the Mauryan Empire to its greatest height. At first he was a warlike king and fought many fierce battles with an enemy to the south. Then he decided to accept the teachings of the Buddha. Asoka promised to rule in a fair and just way. He issued laws that urged his subjects to avoid violence. He made great roads so that people could travel easily—and then placed wells and rest stops all along these roads for travelers to refresh themselves. Soon after Asoka died, however, his empire collapsed.

For the next 500 years, India was a land of troubles. In the center of India, a new kingdom arose to dominate the scene. In the northwest, many Greeks, Persians, and Central Asians entered the land, fleeing the invasions of others. They added new ideas and languages to India's rich mix of culture. In the south, three different kingdoms fought each other off and on.

Around A.D. 320, a new power arose in the north. It was Chandra Gupta (not related to the first emperor), and he came to power by marrying the daughter of an important royal family. With this alliance, he took the title of king and began to conquer other areas. His son followed the same policy and for 40 years fought to win new lands for the Gupta Empire.

His son, Chandra Gupta II, brought the empire to its largest size. He managed to take parts of western India, including some important ports on the Indian Ocean. With these, the Guptas were able to take part in the rich trade that connected India, Southwest Asia, and the world of the Mediterranean Sea. The Gupta Empire, like the Mauryan Empire before it, now stretched all across northern India.

Farmers worked their land, following the cycle of the seasons. Each family was led by the father, and all members of the family worked on the farm. Part of each crop had to be paid to the king each year. Farmers also had to set aside part of each month to work on community resources such as wells or dams. Craft workers and those who worked in trade lived in special sections of each village, town, or city.

The Gupta kings were patrons of the arts, and artists flourished during their rule. The people were happy, too, according to a Chinese traveler who spent many years in India. However, this period of calm ended soon after the death of Chandra Gupta II. Another wave of invaders, related to the Huns sacking Rome at this time, moved into India. Soon the great Gupta Empire had broken up into several smaller kingdoms.

Trade Spreads Indian Religions and Culture

Over time, the religions of Hinduism and Buddhism became more and more distant from the common people. The special class of priests controlled Hinduism. Followers of the Buddha found it difficult to find the promised goal of release from this world. As new peoples moved into India, they brought new ideas. These ideas had an impact on these religions.

The Buddha had taught that a tough course of spiritual life was the way to escape from the suffering of the world. Self-denial was difficult for many people to follow, however. Many people came to worship the Buddha himself as a god, even though he had forbidden it. Then they came to believe that other people could become Buddhas themselves through good works and sacrifice.

These ideas created a new kind of Buddhism, and the religion broke into two ways of belief. Some took the new doctrine, and others held on to the stricter beliefs. However, with this new approach, Buddhism became a popular religion. All believers had the chance to be saved. This change caused an increase in art. Buddhists with money built temples and shrines and then paid artists to decorate them with sculptures and paintings.

Hinduism changed too. By the time of the Mauryan Empire, only priests were involved in many rituals of the faith. For centuries Hinduism had been a religion of many gods. Now other religions based on only one god were becoming more important. Many Hindus began to emphasize three gods in particular. By devoting themselves to one of these gods, people began to feel the religion more directly in their lives.

Indian art enjoyed a period of great vigor during these centuries. Poets and playwrights wrote beautiful works of literature, while other artists laid the foundations for the classical form of dance in India.

The scientists of India had many achievements. They proved that the earth was indeed round many hundred years before Europeans realized it. They made great advances in mathematics, too. They invented the idea of zero and of decimal numbers. The doctors of India became highly skilled. They knew more than 1,000 diseases and used hundreds of medicines from plants to help their patients.

India was also a center of trade. It traded cotton cloth and animals to China for silk. Traders brought spices from Southeast Asia to India and then sold them to Rome and other western peoples. This trade was so busy that large numbers of Roman coins have been found in India. The Indians also traded their own cotton cloth in Africa for ivory and gold. They sent rice and wheat to Arabia for dates and horses. They carried out this trade by land and sea.

Along with goods, Indians spread their culture. The art and architecture of many lands in Southeast Asia shows the influence of Indian art. Some adopted Hinduism, and many began to follow Buddhism.