Chapter 6

Religious Rivalries and India’s Golden Age

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

By the end of the Aryan period, around 500 B.C.E., fairly large kingdoms arose along the Ganges River valley. Urbanization emerged in the capitals of the kingdoms and near major religious temples. The top of the Aryan social hierarchy was occupied by priests, warriors, and merchants. The Vedic priests, or brahmans, utilized an increasingly rigid caste structure to cement their social dominance. By the sixth century B.C.E., however, religious thinkers were beginning to challenge the rituals on which the brahman elite depended. The most important of these thinkers, Buddha, created a new religion that would have worldwide significance. The rivalry between Buddhism and Vedic religion helped to reshape Indian culture. The founding of Buddhism also contributed to the establishment of the Mauryan Empire, India’s first centralized government since Harappa. The Mauryan Empire was brief, and its collapse was followed by another round of nomadic invasions. In the fourth century B.C.E., the Guptas succeeded in creating another empire in northern India. Unlike the Maurya, the Gupta were dedicated to the restoration of brahman dominance, whose religion had developed into what we know as Hinduism.

II. The Age of Brahman Dominance

A. Introduction

In the millennium after 1500 B.C.E., the caste system with the brahmans at its apex came to define the Indian social order. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Harappan civilization, tribes of Aryans settled in the foothills of the Himalayas. Here groups of Aryans formed small states, often extending no farther than a single mountain valley. Most of these states were republics ruled through a council of free warriors that elected kings. The republics were frequently engaged in war with other Aryan states, thus justifying the social position of the warriors. Warriors within the hillside kingdoms kept the authority of the brahmans in check to such an extent that religious exploration began to take place. Buddha was from one of the hillside republics, as were the founders of Jainism.

B. The Kingdoms of the Ganges Plains

As the Aryan settlement extended from the Himalayan foothills to the Ganges plains, more powerful kingdoms supported by brahman priests developed. In these river valley kingdoms, the authority of kings was not checked by councils, and many monarchs claimed divine descent. Monarchies were often hereditary. Lowland kings operated in cooperation with the Vedic brahmans. The position of a lowland king was often subject to challenge from rival monarchs and internal factions.
C. Sources of Brahman Power

Brahmans, who educated royal heirs and advised reigning monarchs, exercised substantial authority in the lowland kingdoms. As a literate group, they were the natural candidates for royal administrative positions. Brahmans were the only group who knew the rituals necessary to crown a new monarch and to confer divine status on the ruler. The position of the brahmans was due to their ability to mediate between deities and humans through offering proper sacrifices. Monopoly over ritual guaranteed the social and political dominance of the brahmans. Not all brahmans served the monarchs. Some were private officials, while others served in local villages. Regardless of their position, brahmans were exempt from taxation and protected from assault. Between 1200 B.C.E. and 900 B.C.E., the brahmans wrote down the sacred texts of the Vedas in Sanskrit.

D. An Era of Widespread Social Change

In addition to the development of stronger monarchies and the establishment of brahman social dominance, there were other changes in the lowland kingdoms. Towns developed around the capitals of the new monarchies, and commercial centers arose along the Ganges River. With urbanization, merchants and artisans were recognized as separate social groups. Merchants, because of their wealth, enjoyed a relatively high place in the social hierarchy. The peasantry also assumed some importance, as farming replaced herding as the primary subsistence activity of the region. Farming villages, irrigation networks, and technological advance permitted the agricultural system to support a larger population. Only with some resistance did peasants pay taxes to kings.

E. The Caste System

Social diversification necessitated change in the tripartite social hierarchy of warriors, priests, and commoners of the Aryans. Merchants and peasants were added to the social system in broad categories called varnas. Each varna was subdivided by occupation into castes, which was determined by the degree to which the occupation was considered polluting. At the top of the hierarchy were the warriors, brahmans, and merchants. Most belonged to the artisan and peasant castes. At the bottom of the social order were the untouchables, who performed socially despicable tasks such as removing human waste or tanning leather. The social hierarchy hardened over time, with caste determining diet, marriage patterns, and access to the Vedas.

F. Enforcing Social Divisions

Individuals were born into castes and could not rise above their social status. Whole castes could rise in the social hierarchy. Those who refused to accept their social status were outcast. Rulers proclaimed that the caste system was divinely ordained. The system theoretically provided for a proper exchange of goods and services. The caste position and career of individuals was determined by that person’s dharma. It was believed that each soul migrated from one being to another after death. Merit earned during the previous life determined one’s karma, which in turn defined the body to which the soul was assigned at the time of rebirth. Failure to accept dharma was considered a great sin.
The Family and the Changing Status of Women

Two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, provide evidence for family life and household structure. The socially preferred household structure was extended, with all male family members gathered under one roof. Lower-caste groups lacked the wealth necessary to sustain extended-family households. As a result, most Indian households were nuclear. Within households, women were subject to patriarchal authority. In the earlier period, women may have had greater freedom than in the last centuries B.C.E. Sources suggest that some women were permitted to read the Vedas. Women were known as teachers, poets, musicians, and artists.

H. The End of an Era

In the millenium after the Aryan migration, Indian civilization was typified by sedentary agriculture that supported urbanization, economic specialization, and social stratification. In the last two centuries B.C.E., still greater changes occurred in Indian civilization.

III. Religious Ferment and the Rise of Buddhism

A. Introduction

The growth of Buddhism challenged the traditional brahman dominance of ritual and religion. The Buddhist challenge was strengthened by the conversion of Maurayan rulers, who established a centralized government in northern India. The subsequent decline of the Mauryan empire made a brahman counteroffensive against Buddhism possible. The period of religious experimentation in India was contemporary with the origins of Confucianism, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, and Greek rationalism in other civilizations. Challenges to the Vedic priests brought the Indian caste system into question and proposed new types of religious experience. The most profound of the religious thinkers was Buddha, who founded a new religion.

B. The Making of a Religious Teacher

Buddha lived from the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. to the second decade of the fifth century B.C.E. He was born into the warrior class in one of the hillside republics, where centralized authority was weak. Buddha left the royal court as a young man, renounced claims to the throne, and became a wandering ascetic. After a series of religious experiments with various theologies and techniques, meditation under a Bo tree led to enlightenment and the discovery of the Four Noble Truths. As all earthly things are transitory, one can escape suffering only by ceasing to desire things of the world. The complete departure from desire allows one to attain nirvana, an eternal state of tranquility. Once he understood the means of achieving enlightenment, Buddha attempted to spread this knowledge to all of humanity. He soon attracted a following of students, who transformed his teachings into an organized religion.

C. The Emergence of Buddhism as a Religion

After Buddha’s death, his followers became monks who dedicated their lives to teaching and contemplation. Over time, groups of monks developed somewhat different theologies that coalesced into rival schools. In order to make their religion more accessible to all men, the monks stressed popular tales of Buddha’s life, transforming him into a deity. They also described the concept of nirvana as an attainable heaven. Lay people were encouraged to perform good deeds rather than to spend their lives in meditation.
D. The Buddhist Challenge

Buddhism mounted a successful challenge to brahman dominance. Monastic organization proved successful as a foundation for the new religion. Buddhists accepted the Vedic concepts of karma and reincarnation but opposed the scriptures of the Vedas as divinely inspired. Buddhists criticized the brahmans’ emphasis on ritual and sacrifice. The Buddha attempted to do away with the caste system and strict social hierarchy, a teaching that was popular among the lower social groups, including the untouchables. Buddhists also accepted women as followers. Monasteries accepted women as members. Thus in all areas, Buddhism sought to overturn the cultural system on which the brahmans depended.

E. The Greek Interlude

The cultural upheavals of northern India were magnified by Alexander the Great’s invasion of the region in 327 B.C.E. Alexander’s forces enjoyed military success in the northern Indus River valley, but his soldiers refused to go farther. His forces returned to Persia in 324 B.C.E. The impact of the Alexandrian invasion was largely cultural. Greek astronomical and mathematical ideas entered India. In return Indian religious ideas filtered back to the Mediterranean. Combined motifs led to new styles of sculpture.

F. The Rise of the Mauryas

With the withdrawal of the Greeks, one of the indigenous regional lords was able to create a northern Indian empire. Chandragupta Maurya (322 B.C.E. to 298 B.C.E.) conquered the northern Indus region and then carried his campaigns into the Ganges River valley. Chandragupta created a magnificent court and proclaimed himself an absolute ruler. He maintained a large standing army and was able to replace some regional rulers with imperial administrators. Mauryan political ideas were compiled in the Arthashastra, which suggested assassination and bribery as means of expanding power. Chandragupta’s conquests were completed by his son, Bindusara, and his grandson, Ashoka.

G. Ashoka’s Conversion and the Flowering of Buddhism in the Mauryan Age

Regret for a violent early life led Ashoka (268 B.C.E. to 232 B.C.E.) to convert to Buddhism. Following his conversion, the emperor sought to build his empire through internal improvements and social reforms based on Buddhist teachings. He attempted to establish a centralized bureaucracy in order to ensure uniform justice throughout his domain. Attempts to politically unify India stirred resistance from displaced brahmans and local rulers.

H. Imperial Patronage and Social Change

Merchants and artisans supported the Mauryan program, leading to greater patronage of Buddhist monasteries. Women also supported the Buddhist alternative. Monastic complexes and shrines spread throughout the Indian subcontinent. Buddhist missionaries carried the new religion from India to Southeast Asia and into the central Asian steppes.

I. Ashoka’s Death and the Decline of the Mauryas

The unified government failed to survive Ashoka. Internal court factions and local rulers soon caused the empire to disintegrate by 185 B.C.E, and while some rulers promoted Buddhism, none matched Ashoka’s power and resolution.
IV. Brahmanical Recovery and the Splendors of the Gupta Age

A. Brahman Revival and Buddhist Decline

Buddhism and Hinduism vied for power after the fall of Mauyras, with Hinduism gaining dominance by the time of the Gupta. As Buddhism became more dependent on monasticism, it lost some of its contacts with popular religion. As the Buddhist monks became more remote, the brahmans attempted to introduce religious reforms calculated to appeal to the masses. They stressed the role of devotional worship and small, personal sacrifices. Various groups were associated with specific deities. Temples were established to provide focal points for popular worship. Women and lower caste members were called to participate in religious cults. The number of popular festivals was increased. Buddha, himself, was absorbed into the Hindu pantheon. Brahman thinkers placed greater emphasis on the salvationist aspects of the Upanishads, the later books of the Vedas. Buddhism was weakened by the decline of commercial ties to the Buddhist monasteries. The collapse of the Mauryan and Kushana monarchies further weakened Buddhist patronage and support. The rise of the Guptas, enthusiastic supporters of Hinduism, led to the final demise of Buddhism in India.

B. The Gupta Empire

The Gupta family rose to power in the Ganges River valley in the last decades of the third century C.E. The empire built by the Guptas never extended as far as that of the Mauryas, nor was the dynasty able to establish much administrative centralization. Former regional rulers continued to govern but were required to send tribute to the Gupta emperors. Although internal disputes continued to occur, foreign invasion was minimized until the fifth century C.E.

C. A Hindu Renaissance

The Guptas were staunch patrons and defenders of Hinduism and brahmanic privilege. The Gupta era was a period of Hindu temple-building in Indian cities. The temples were covered with sculpture and decoration, which stressed symbolism rather than realism. The temples served as massive mandalas, or cosmic diagrams.

D. Achievements in Literature and the Sciences

The Gupta era was a creative period for Sanskrit and Tamil literature. The poet Kalidasa, a Sanskrit writer, was active during this era. Advances were also made in science and mathematics. Gupta mathematicians calculated the value of , utilized the zero, invented the Arabic number system, and used decimals. Indians were also advanced in medical techniques.
F. Intensifying Caste and Gender Inequities

With brahman resurgence, the caste system was revived as the basis of the social hierarchy. Social distinctions were more rigorously observed, particularly against lower caste people. Women also suffered a reduction in status. They were strictly subject to patriarchal authority within their households and deprived of the ability to read the Vedas. Women were unable to inherit property and were increasingly seen as a social liability for families. Widows were unable to remarry, and a woman’s value was calculated by the number of sons born. Outside of marriage there were few occupations open to women.

G. The Pleasures of Elite Life

Elite families lived in large compounds with numerous servants. Males from upper castes were expected to pass through four stages of life: students, householders and husbands, hermitage and meditation, and wandering asceticism. Few actually passed beyond the householder stage. Life for wealthy males was luxurious and pleasurable.

H. Lifestyles of the Ordinary People

Men and women of the lower castes had little leisure time other than that permitted to attend popular festivals. Most time was spent in work. Lower castes were supposed to show deference to members of higher social groups. The proficiency of Indian agriculture produced sufficient food to support the lower castes without difficulty. Commerce with Southeast Asia and West Asia continued to play a significant role during the Gupta era.

I. Gupta Decline and a Return to Political Fragmentation

The appearance of the Huns distracted the Guptas from control of their client kingdoms. By the middle of the fifth century C.E., foreign invaders entered from the north and decimated Gupta military strength. The empire fragmented into numerous regional kingdoms and remained vulnerable to outside assault.

V. Global Connections: India and the Wider World

No classical civilization was more open to outside influence that India, and in Buddhism it produced a true world religion. Indian influence was particularly strong in Southeast Asia, but it is also found in art, philosophy, and religious ideas in the Mediterranean. India’s influence depended on the its costal regions becoming a core region of a trade network that included the silk roads and the Indian Ocean.
TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

- Fall of Gupta empire
- Life of Buddha
- Fall of Maurya empire
- Chandragupta initiates Maurya empire
- Beginning of Gupta empire
- Alexander the Great's invasion of India

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

- Untouchables
- Dharma
- Karma
- Transmigration
- Reincarnation
- Mahabharata
- Mahabharata
- Nirvana
- Kautilya
- Arthashastra
- Buddha
- Buddha
- Stupas
- Chandragupta Maurya
- Ashoka
- Guptas
- Kushanas
- Upanishads
- Skanda Gupta
- Gurus
- Mandala
- Sanskrit
- Tamil
- Kamasutra
- Skanda Gupta
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

- Indus River
- Ganges River
- boundaries of Mauryan Empire
- boundaries of Gupta Empire
- Pataliputra

To what extent was classical India still defined by its relationships to the major river systems of southern Asia? What other lines of communication were available?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What were the fundamental patterns of Indian civilization?
2. What were the sources of preimperial brahmanic authority?
3. How was the caste system organized?
4. What were the basic beliefs of early Buddhism?
5. How did the rise of Buddhism represent a challenge to the brahmans?
6. Compare and contrast the organization of the Maurya and Gupta empires.
7. What were the keys to the brahmans’ recovery of authority in India?
8. How did the recovery of brahman authority shape caste and gender relations in India?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. Why is it possible to say that the brahmans and the caste system were more fundamental to India than political unity?
2. Compare and contrast the political, social, and religious organization of Gupta India and Han China.
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. What were the two underlying patterns of Indian civilization during the classical period?
   a. hierarchic society and a scholar-gentry
   b. centralized empire and brahmanic dominance
   c. social mobility and political stability
   d. political disunity and the stability of the caste system

2. Why were the kingdoms of the Ganges River plain more centralized than those of the Himalaya foothills?
   a. The brahmans were less influential in the kingdoms of the Ganges River plain.
   b. Large amounts of labor and organization were necessary to clear the rainforests and construct irrigation projects.
   c. Due to the brahmanic emphasis on monumental architecture, labor organization was necessary.
   d. The kingdoms of the Ganges River plain were influenced by Chinese political organization.

3. Which of the following was NOT a brahmanic privilege in the early kingdoms of the Ganges plain?
   a. Only they could read the sacred Vedas where the rituals for sacrifice were specified.
   b. They were exempt from taxes.
   c. They received special legal protection from bodily injury.
   d. They were the only caste eligible to hold the office of king.

4. Which of the following statements concerning the Indian caste structure is most accurate?
   a. A caste group could collectively rise or fall.
   b. A person’s caste was determined by his personal talents and work ethic.
   c. A person could move up in the caste system during his lifetime.
   d. Kings had the power to change a person’s caste.

5. *Karma* was the
   a. transferral of the soul from one body to another after death.
   b. sum of merits and demerits at any given point in time.
   c. caste position and career determined by a person’s birth.
   d. lowest caste in Indian society.

6. What was the typical household among lower-caste groups in Indian society?
   a. patriarchal extended family
   b. patriarchal nuclear family
   c. matriarchal extended family
   d. matriarchal nuclear family
7. Which of the following was not a teaching of Buddha?
   a. The moment we are born we begin to die.
   b. Attachments to impermanent things of the world are the source of suffering.
   c. Only one’s sense of self is real.
   d. Once enlightenment is achieved, the individual is released from suffering.

8. Which of the brahmanic teachings did Buddha accept?
   a. the Vedas
   b. the efficacy of the brahmans’ sacrifices
   c. the ideas of *karma* and reincarnation
   d. the caste system

9. The emperor who converted to Buddhism was
   a. Chandragupta Maurya.
   b. Ashoka.
   c. Bindusara.
   d. Skanda Gupta.

10. How did the Gupta differ from the Maurya?
    a. Their empire was more centralized than that of the Maurya.
    b. The Gupta converted to Buddhism.
    c. The Gupta were staunch supporters of Hinduism and the brahmans.
    d. The Gupta empire was much larger than that of the Maurya.