

8

INDIAN EMPIRES

1500 B.C.E. – 1100 C.E.

CULTURAL COHESION IN A DIVIDED SUBCONTINENT

COMMENTARY

The two main themes of this chapter – the last in the section on *Empires and Imperialism* – are summed up in the subtitle. First, unlike the sprawling empires of the Persians, Alexander the Great, or Rome, or the fluctuating boundaries of successive Chinese dynasties, “India” forms a distinct geographical unit, defined by two huge bays of the Indian Ocean – the Arabian Sea to the west and Bay of Bengal to the east – and the Himalayan and Hindu Kush mountain ranges to the north. This **subcontinent**, encompassing the modern nations of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, is over half as large as Europe and more topographically separated from the **Eurasian** land mass. It is also just as culturally distinct from the rest of Eurasia as is the subcontinent we call “Europe” and, according to Howard Spodek (himself a historian of India), is arguably equally deserving of “continent” status (p. 231). Secondly, as opposed to the Roman Empire and even China, which contained many different cultures within their political borders, the opposite has been the case within India, where a rich, unified cultural tradition has endured amid political fragmentation and numerous invasions from beyond its geographical boundaries. This culture, which, as we learned in Chapter 3, originated as a fusion of the Indus Valley civilization and the nomadic **Indo-Aryan** peoples who began to migrate into the subcontinent sometime after 2000 B.C.E., developed in the **Ganges River** valley between 1000 and 600 B.C.E., was later spread throughout India by the **Maurya** and **Gupta** dynasties, and successfully assimilated waves of Persian, Greek, Mongol, Arab, and Turkish invaders.

Numerous other comparisons, both implicit and explicit, are made with the other great empires throughout the chapter. Unlike Rome, which maintained the political unity of its Mediterranean “core” area for over seven centuries, or China, whose political unity has only been temporarily disrupted since the Qin period, India has never experienced complete political unification and even partial unification under the Mauryas (324-184 B.C.E.); Kanishka’s **Kushana** dominion (c. 78-103 C.E.); the Gupta Empire (320-397 C.E.) and the later Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empires has been infrequent and relatively short-lived. Moreover, “imperial” rule has often been exercised indirectly, through local rulers and family **lineages**, rather than the institutionalized bureaucracies so characteristic of Rome and China, and has usually excluded all or parts of the **Deccan**, the subcontinent’s southern peninsula. Also, both the political and social history of early India has been somewhat harder to recover than that of Persia, Greece, Rome or China, owing to the lack of secular historical annals and to the warm, wet climate and the densely-concentrated population, neither of which are conducive to preservation and archaeological excavation. Historians of India, therefore, are forced to rely on folk-tales such as the **Puranas**, and mythical epics like the **Mahabharata**, or Hindu religious texts, such as the **Vedas**, for information on pre-Maurya times.

There are, however, several striking similarities between India and the other great imperial civilizations. First, while Indian rulers rarely attempted to extend their political control beyond the natural boundaries of the Indian subcontinent, Indian cultural, artistic and religious (Hindu and Buddhist) influences spread throughout east and southeast Asia and have left a lasting imprint on Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, and even China (via **Mahayana Buddhism**). Thus Indian cultural influence, like that of Greece, Rome and China, extended far beyond its political borders. Also, as the text points out, India’s development, no less than that of China or Europe, was directly affected by the great folk migrations of the period c. 200 B.C.E. to 600 C.E., and in particular by the direct incursions and migratory chain-reactions set off by the peoples known in India as the **Hunas**, to the Han Chinese as the Xiongnu, and to the Romans as the Huns.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- A. Introduction: Cultural Cohesion in a Divided Subcontinent
- B. Settlement in South Asia: an Overview
 - 1. Indo-Aryan settlement: *janapadas*
 - 2. The Kingdom of Magadha and the Maurya dynasty
 - a. Alexander the Great's invasion of India
 - b. Chandragupta Maurya and Asoka
 - 3. The Gupta Dynasty
- C. The Indian Empires: How Do We Know?
 - 1. Archaeology and philology
 - 2. Written texts
 - a. The Puranas and the Vedas
 - b. The Bramanas and the Upanishads
 - c. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*
 - d. The *Bhagavadgita*
- D. Familial, Social, Economic, and Religious Institutions
- E. Statecraft under the Mauryas and Guptas: What Do We Know?
 - 1. The Mauryan Empire
 - a. Chandragupta Maurya, Kautilya and the *Artha-sastra*
 - b. Social and religious influences on the state:
 - i. Hindu religious goals
 - ii. Caste and the guilds
 - c. PROFILE: Asoka, India's Buddhist Emperor
 - 2. Greek and Buddhist influences
 - a. Menander (Milinda) and Gandhara
SPOTLIGHT: Gandharan Art
 - b. The Kushanas and Kanishka
 - 3. The Gupta Empire
 - a. Military conquest and indirect rule
 - b. Revival of Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophy
 - i. The *Shakuntala*
 - ii. The *Vedanta* and the *Upanishads*
- F. Huna Invasions and the End of the North Indian Empire
 - 1. Origins of the Xiongnu
 - 2. Impact and legacies of the Huna invasions
- G. Regional Diversity and Power
 - 1. Outside the Ganges Valley: Pallavas, Colas, hill peoples, etc.
 - 2. SOURCE: Tamil Culture in Southeast India
- H. Sea Trade and Cultural Influence: from Rome to Southeast Asia
 - 1. Trade with Rome and the Mediterranean
 - 2. Southeast Asia: "Greater India"
 - a. Trade and the spread of Indian culture
 - b. Hinduism in the Kingdoms of Funan and Champa
 - c. Buddhism and the Sailendra Kingdom in Java
- I. India, China, and Rome: Empires and Intermediate Institutions – How Do They Compare?

IDENTIFICATION TERMS

For each term, students should be able to provide an identification or definition, an approximate date, a geographical location (if relevant) and – most important – a concise explanation of its significance in the context of the chapter. Terms that appeared in the *Study Guide* are listed in **bold** font in the first column.

<i>Artha-sastra</i>	Magadha	Hinduism
Angkor Wat and Borobodur	Asoka	Buddhism
Indo-Aryan languages	Deccan	Gandhara
Menander and Kanishka	Ganges River Valley	Kushanas
rock and pillar edicts	<i>janapadas</i>	Hunas
castes	<i>Puranas</i>	Chandra Gupta II
Cholas and Pallavas	<i>Mahabharata</i>	Sanskrit
The Ramayana	<i>Vedas</i>	Ajanta Caves
Chandragupta Maurya	<i>Bhagavad-Gita</i>	Funan and Champa
Tamils	<i>dharma</i>	Srivijaya

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading and studying Chapter 8, students should be able to:

1. Understand the development of Indian territorial political institutions and the possible reasons for the lack of political cohesion throughout India's history.
2. Appreciate the geographical, ethnic, religious and political diversity of India and the paradox of the existence of "cultural cohesion" in the midst of this diversity.
3. Be able to compare and contrast the major elements of the Maurya and Gupta Empires.
4. Explain the importance of caste, local political organization and religion in India's political and cultural development.
5. Understand the cultural concept of a "Greater India" and be able to explain the various methods by which Indian cultural influence was diffused throughout east and southeast Asia.

SUGGESTIONS FOR LECTURE TOPICS

1. Discuss Indian settlement patterns, caste and ethnic diversity and their subsequent influence on Indian political disunity.
2. Discuss the importance of the Maurya Dynasty's importance in Indian development, with particular reference to its historical links to Alexander the Great, the achievements of Chandragupta Maurya and Asoka, and the latter's adoption of Buddhism.
3. Use the model of empire presented in Chapter 5 to compare and contrast the Roman Empire, the different Chinese imperial dynasties and the Maurya and Gupta Empires in India.
4. Explain the chapter's subtitle, "Cultural Cohesion in a Divided Subcontinent," as way of delineating the major aspects of Indian cultural traditions. Include a discussion of "Greater India" in this discussion.

TOPICS FOR ESSAYS OR CLASS DISCUSSIONS

1. Current events & issues: It could be argued that a combination of internal and external forces have been responsible for the fact that political unity within the Indian subcontinent has always been partial and short-lived. What are the principal reasons for this major aspect of Indian history? What examples may be seen even today on the Indian sub-continent?

2. **Group work:** Compare the major achievements of India's two most important dynasties, the Mauryas and the Guptas. What were the most significant and lasting contributions of each to the development of Indian society and culture?
3. Compare the origins, role and function of Greek, Roman and Chinese governments with those in India, based on Chapters 5-8. In what ways were they similar? What were the major differences?
4. Explain the effects of the Hunas' invasions on India. How does their impact upon India compare with their effect on China and the Roman Empire?
5. How and when was Indian culture spread throughout Southeast Asia? What evidence do we have for this cultural diffusion? Cite as many different examples and types of primary source evidence as you can in your answer.
6. In the absence of the sort of official histories that exist for China and the strong tradition of critical history writing such as existed in ancient Greece and Rome, what type of sources must historians of early India rely upon to construct their narratives and derive inferences? What can be learned from these sources? What biases might they exhibit? Cite specific examples from the primary sources to support your points.
7. Contrast the ideas of governing put forth in the *Artha-sastra* with those promoted on Asoka's rock and pillar edicts. How do historians account for this change in attitude between the government of Chandragupta Maurya and his successor?

TEXT RESOURCES (Spodek, 2nd ed.)

Timetables, charts and graphs:	Indian Empires	(p. 233-234)
Large photographs or illustrations:	Scene from the <i>Mahabharata</i>	(p. 236)
	Scene from the <i>Ramayana</i>	(p. 237)
	Buddha of the "great wonders" (Gandhara)	(p. 243)
	Wall-painting from the Ajanta Caves	(p. 245)
	Borobodur Temple, Java	(p. 250)
	Angkor Wat, Cambodia	(p. 251)
Maps:	Mauryan India	(p. 238)
	Gupta India	(p. 244)
	Classical South Asia	(p. 247)
SPOTLIGHT:	Gandharan Art	(p. 242-243)
PROFILE:	Asoka: India's Buddhist Emperor	(p. 240-241)
SOURCES:	Tamil Culture in Southeast Asia	(p. 248)

ADDITIONAL PRIMARY SOURCES (*Documents Set & www.prenhall.com/Spodek*)

- 8-1 [Kautilya], *Artha-sastra*: a wily courtier's handbook on political survival
- 8-2 Fa-Hsien (Faxian): a Chinese perspective on Gupta India
- 8-3 *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*: a European navigator's view of the Indian subcontinent
- 8-4 King Milinda (Menander): the Greek world's incursion into India [from *The Questions of King Milinda*]
- 8-5 Asoka: how a life was turned around [from *The Edicts of Asoka*]
- 8-6 [Kalidasa], *The Shakuntala*: the privileges, obligations and limits of the royal Kshatriya caste
- www In Alexander's wake: the India of Chandragupta Maurya

AUDIOVISUAL SOURCES (videos, DVD's, CD-ROM, and web-sites)

Exploring Ancient World Cultures: <http://eawc.evansville.edu> [web-site]

This site is a comparative study of eight ancient world cultures, including India.

Indian Culture and History: <http://www.webhead.com/wwwvl/India> [web-site]

Historical background to modern India and links to other Indian history web-sites.

World Cultures to 1500: <http://wsu.edu.8080/~dee/InternetResources.html> [web-site]

An excellent set of links to a number of different topics in world history, including science and mathematics (particularly important for India), art, language, and religion.

The World History CD-ROM: Instructional Resources Corp., 1996. [CD-ROM]

Includes a library of 2400 images, each with extensive historical caption. Maps, portraits, artifacts, works of art and even sound bytes are included. This CD has much information on early Indian culture.