The Greeks Invade India

In 326 B.C., a Greek king, Alexander the Great, who was determined to conquer the world, appeared in India on the banks of the Indus. His men, far from home, tired, and afraid of the unknown that lay before them, refused to go on.

The Greek conquest of India was brief. Greek culture had little impact on India, except for its influence on Indian art. Early Buddhist art used no human image of Buddha. After the Greek invasion of Indiá, however, sculptors influenced by Greek and Roman art created the first Buddha in human form. This Greco/Roman-style Buddha was the model for later works by Indian, Chinese, and Japanese artists.

The Maurya Empire

An important result of the Greek invasion was its influence on a young Indian leader, Chandragupta Maurya. When Alexander conquered India, he destroyed the small kingdoms and republics in the northwest. In 322 B.C., Chandragupta took possession of the throne of Magadha in northeastern India. This area, rich in timber and animals, served as a base for Chandragupta’s expansion to the northwest when Alexander left. Magadha became wealthy and was the most powerful kingdom on the Ganges plain. It formed the center of the Mauryan Empire, which spread into the Indus Valley and the Punjab.

The great accomplishment of the Mauryas was the establishment of good and stable government. Chandragupta set up a postal system, developed roads, and built an extensive irrigation system. Business and trade flourished, and an army of 700,000 soldiers maintained order.

The Wise Rule of Asoka

Great as Chandragupta was, his grandson Asoka was even greater. Asoka, who ruled from about 273 to 232 B.C., is thought by many to have been the greatest king India ever had, and one of the greatest rulers who has ever lived. He is remembered and respected most because, although a powerful and mighty warrior, he did not use force to rule or to extend his kingdom. As a ruler, he followed the principles of Buddhism, and he commanded his officials to be just and considerate.

Under Asoka, the Maurya Empire spread south through the Deccan Plateau to the lands of the Tamils in the extreme south, and west to the Gondhara region near the Persian border and to the Hindu Kush Mountains.

The Rise and Fall of Buddhism

As the Hindu religion developed over the years, many Indians did not approve of the changes that had taken place within it. They felt that the religion had too many ceremonies that did little to increase the goodness of the people. These ceremonies served only to increase the powers of the Brahmans (priests). Moreover, many of the Sudras class and the untouchables were unhappy with the misery and poverty and their lives.

One who disapproved strongly was Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.), a prince of a kingdom near the Himalayas in North India. According to one legend, when he was nearly 30 years old, Gautama was given four signs. As he walked in the palace grounds, he saw
three men: one very old, one ill and in pain, and one dead. Gautama was very troubled by these signs of age, pain, and death. Then he saw a fourth man—a wandering holy man—and at that moment he realized that this was the way of life he had to follow. Other stories say Gautama discovered the misery and poverty of his people when he made secret trips throughout his kingdom.

Whatever the reason, Gautama left the palace, his easy life, and his wife and son to search for the answer to the question that was troubling him: Why do people have to suffer from pain and sorrow? At first, Gautama tried traditional Hindu ways to find the answer to the question. He studied with Hindu teachers and lived alone in the forest as a hermit. He fasted and denied himself all comforts so that his mind would be free to find the answer.

Then one day, as he meditated (engaged in deep thought) under a sacred fig tree, ideas miraculously began to come to him. After 49 days of meditating, the answer to the question became clear. He had become the Buddha—“the Enlightened One”—and Buddhism was born.

### The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path

The basis of Gautama’s belief was the “Four Noble Truths of Stopping Sorrow”:

1. Sorrow and suffering are part of all life.
2. People suffer because they desire things they cannot have.
3. The way to escape suffering is to end desire, to stop wanting, and to reach a stage of not wanting.
4. To end desire, one should follow the “middle way—the paths that avoid the extremes of too much pleasure and desire as well as too much refusal to have pleasure and desire.” There is an Eightfold Path to the middle way:

   - Right understanding
   - Right means of earning a living
   - Right purpose
   - Right effort
   - Right speech
   - Right awareness
   - Right conduct
   - Right meditation

These teachings challenged basic Hindu beliefs. Buddhism places more importance on how one lives than on one’s caste or class. Among Buddhists today, there is no caste system.

### Rules for Right Living

Buddhists believe that there are four Rules for Right Living:

1. Hatred is never ended by hatred; hatred is ended by love.
2. People should overcome anger by love.
3. People should overcome evil by goodness.
4. Everyone trembles at punishment; everyone loves life.

### Buddhism under Asoka

The people of India were ready to accept a new religion and a new set of ideals. The rule of the Brahmans (priests of the Veda) was harsh and unfair. Many Indians were unhappy, and opposition grew. Buddhist priests told the people that to gain knowledge and to be just, ethical, and compassionate was the best way to live. They spoke against the caste system and the complicated rites that the Brahmans followed.

Asoka sent people all over India to spread Buddhist ideas. Indians by the millions accepted the teachings of Buddha. After the death of Asoka, however, there were many changes in Buddhism. The religion survived and grew stronger in many parts of Asia, but in India it almost disappeared. Today, there are only about 1 million Buddhists in India.

### Reasons for the Fall of Buddhism

The fall of Buddhism had many causes. Hinduism was broad and tolerant, and it accepted many of the teachings of the Buddha. Also, Buddhists in India were quite willing to compromise with the beliefs and customs of Hinduism. In fact, Indian Buddhism eventually
became so much like Hinduism that it was regarded as a part of Hinduism. The final blow to Buddhism in India was delivered by the Muslims. Pushing into India from the 8th century on, they destroyed the great Buddhist monasteries, burned the libraries, and killed the monks. Most of the monks who survived left India, and Buddhism was never again important there.

Jainism

Another attempt to reform the Hindu religion was the result of the work of Mahavira ("Great Hero") who lived at about the same time as Gautama, the Buddha. Mahavira believed in many of the same things as Buddha. However, he felt that strict discipline and self-denial were the only ways to purify the soul.

Jains, as his followers call themselves, do not have gods and do not pray. They do not believe in violence. Ahimsa, or nonviolence, is their central belief. They do not fight back if attacked. They do not eat meat or do farm work because they believe that farming the soil kills plant and animal life.

Jainism never became a very important religion in India or elsewhere. (Can you think of reasons why this was so?) However, the important concept of ahimsa was adopted by the Buddhists, and in the 20th century Ahimsa became the cornerstone of the Congress Party's struggle for independence under Mohandas K. Gandhi.

The Dravidian Tamils

Soon after the death of Asoka, the Maurya Empire of North India began to fall apart. For the next 600 years invaders swept over the Indian Plains. In time, the invaders were either driven out or became Hindus. Meanwhile, the Deccan Plateau and South India were entering the mainstream of Indian history. People of these regions made important contributions to Hinduism.

The southern area was called the Tamil country, after the main Dravidian language in use there. The people of the Tamil country began to combine the Hindu traditions of the Aryans with their own Dravidian folklore to produce some of India's finest poetry, epics, and music.

The Dravidians who had been pursued to the south during the Aryan invasion, were different from the Aryans in appearance and language. The Dravidian languages, which are still spoken in South India and Sri Lanka (Ceylon), are not Indo-European; in fact, they are unlike any other languages in the world. Today, the main Dravidian language is Tamil.

The Importance of Trade

The Dravidian Tamils were sailors who traded and conquered. Trade was an important part of life in India in the last 600 years B.C. Important trade routes were developed to link India with western Asia and the Mediterranean world. In the Deccan and South India, trade increased as traders from China and Arabia visited Indian ports. Sea trade flourished, and peninsular India, long overshadowed by the states of the north, began to gain in influence and power.

By about the 1st century A.D. there was a profitable trade from Tamil ports in South India to China, Egypt, and parts of the Roman Empire. The Tamils carried cargoes of
spices, jewels, perfumes, textiles, and animals for trade in the Asian and Roman world. In
return, they received gold from Rome and silk textiles and porcelain from China.

India's contacts with Southeast Asia developed as a direct result of its trade with the
West. Southeast Asian lands were largely unsettled and undeveloped. However, they pro-
duced spices, which were much in demand in the West. Indian traders sailed to various
parts of Southeast Asia, and many settled there. The Indians brought their customs and
their religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, to Southeast Asia.

In North India, the period of invasions came to an end when the Gupta family, led by
another Chandragupta, united the kingdoms of the north. The Guptas ruled for over 200
years (A.D. 320–550), a period of stable government and great accomplishment. Indian
scholars, writers, and artists distinguished themselves by producing masterpieces of art, lit-
erature, and architecture.

Gupta Accomplishments

Mathematics

In the field of mathematics, the Indians were the actual developers of so-called Arabic
numerals. Arab sailors, merchants, and traders learned of this Indian system of numbers
and carried it to the Middle East and then to Europe. The idea of zero, the idea of infinity,
and a decimal system were also developed by Indian mathematicians. The value of π was
determined to be 3.1416.

Medicine

In medicine, Gupta India was far advanced. Indian physicians had learned to diagnose
treat many ailments. Surgery was quite sophisticated; surgeons set broken bones, per-
formed Caesarean sections, and used plastic surgery to repair mutilations. In addition,
Indian doctors were aware of an important fact not understood by Western physicians until
modern times—that cleanliness can prevent infection.

Literature

Kalidasa was the greatest of the poets and playwrights of the period. In fact, some of his
plays are still performed in India and in other countries. His drama Sakuntala, a love story
about a king and his beautiful bride, is available in English. The early Hindu storytellers
delighted in fairy tales, folklore, and animated fables. In Gupta times, many of these tales
were gathered into a collection that passed eventually, by way of the Arabs, into European
literature. In this way, many modern European writers are indebted to the Hindus for the
forms or plots of their tales.

Art and Architecture

The Guptas spent large sums of money on the building of temples. Painters and sculpt-
tors were well rewarded for their work. Gupta palaces were richly decorated and were
always showplaces. Nearly all the art and architecture was of a religious nature.

The peak of Gupta art and architecture was reached in the Deccan. The magnificent
cave temples at Ajanta and Ellora took nearly 1,000 years to build. All were cut out of solid
rock, and the outside walls were decorated with sculptured figures, columns, and fresco
paintings. South India has some of the finest freestanding temples in the world.

Influence of the Guptas

The Guptas left a great heritage:
1. Sanskrit was the language of the Guptas. The influence of Sanskrit culture gave
   India a cultural unity.