

## 4.2 Classical India

### Buddhism and the Maurya and Gupta Empires

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By 1700 BC, the most successful civilization in India (technically modern Pakistan) was abandoned. While the fall of the Harappans, as they are now known, declined for a variety of reasons it is widely believed that they fell in part because of the invading Aryans from the Caucasus. The Aryans were a nomadic group of herders from Central Asia, but as they settled India, they slowly influenced Indian society and introduced the caste system, a major aspect of Hinduism.

#### I. Buddhism

For as widespread and powerful as Hinduism was in India, it was not without its flaws. Many took great issue with the religious system and its effects on society as a whole. Unfortunately, the vast majority of people who hoped to reform Hinduism were of the lowest castes as they were the ones that suffered under the rigid caste system the most. Few influential people cared to reform the system as they benefited from it. Relief came only when a man of considerable wealth decided to create an alternative belief system.

##### **Siddhartha Gautama**

Born circa 563 BC, Siddhartha Gautama lived a life of luxury as a member of a wealthy family in Nepal. Despite living a relatively comfortable life, Siddhartha noticed the immense suffering people endured regardless of their caste. One day Siddhartha would go on to completely reject his life of riches and he adopted a life of asceticism, intense self-discipline and refusal to indulge in pleasures. Determined to discover the cause and meaning of human suffering, he meditated for 49 consecutive days under a sacred bodhi tree.

Following this meditation he gained enlightenment and shortly after he announced his newly discovered truth to the public around 528 BC. With his enlightenment, Siddhartha became the Buddha, which means Enlightened One. Shortly after his announcement, Siddhartha gained disciples who would become the first Buddhist monks. These monks would travel throughout northern India spreading Buddhist ideals.



##### **Key Aspects of the Buddhism**

There are two components to Buddhism, The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are the primary Buddhist beliefs that all those seeking enlightenment must accept as truth. They are:

1. All life is suffering.
2. Suffering is a result of human desire.
3. One can be freed of this desire.
4. One is freed of desire by following the Eightfold Path

In understanding these things, believers are naturally driven towards the Eightfold Path. **The Eightfold Path** is one of the earliest summaries of the Buddha's teachings. The best way to eliminate desire is by replacing what is corrupt (our desire) with the right things. These eight paths are right views, aspirations (hope of achieving something), right speech, right conduct, right livelihood (work), right effort (willingness to put in work), right mindfulness (attention, specifically to teachings), and right meditation (or concentration).



### **The Two Vehicles of Buddhism**

The overall goal of Buddhism is to reach **nirvana**, the state of perfect peace and harmony, and the Eightfold Path is the way to get there. Much like Hinduism, Buddhism believes that this takes many lifetimes to accomplish and so reincarnation is a major aspect of Buddhism as well. The elimination of human desire is extraordinarily difficult to accomplish, as one might expect. One popular way to facilitate the journey to nirvana was to adopt **monasticism**, or self-isolation, but a variety of methods and beliefs developed each with diverse traditions, beliefs, and methods to reach nirvana. Two prevalent forms of Buddhism, sometimes called vehicles, developed over the course of history. Each appealed to different social groups, generally along economic lines.

The first vehicle was Hinayan (the Lesser Vehicle) known as **Theravada**, which literally means "the way of elders". It emphasized meditation and simplicity. Those who follow Theravada believe that nirvana lies in the surrender of human consciousness and individuality, declaring the pursuit of gods just as corrupt as the pursuit of human desire. As a result, they considered the Buddha a simple man. The Lesser Vehicle was most appealing to the lower classes as they usually had little material wealth to cling on to. On the other hand, the higher classes were drawn to the Greater Vehicle.



The second vehicle was **Mahayana** (the Greater Vehicle), which was a far more sophisticated and went beyond the teachings of Buddha. Mahayana really clung to the idea that there were many ways to nirvana while also believing that the Buddha's teachings were not comforting enough. Even still, they believed the Buddha himself was deity. In fact, they believed that there are people who reach enlightenment but choose to stay on earth as deities called 'bodhisattvas'. Mahayana itself was incredibly ritualistic – emphasizing the need to perform these rituals in order to fulfill the Eightfold Path and reach enlightenment.



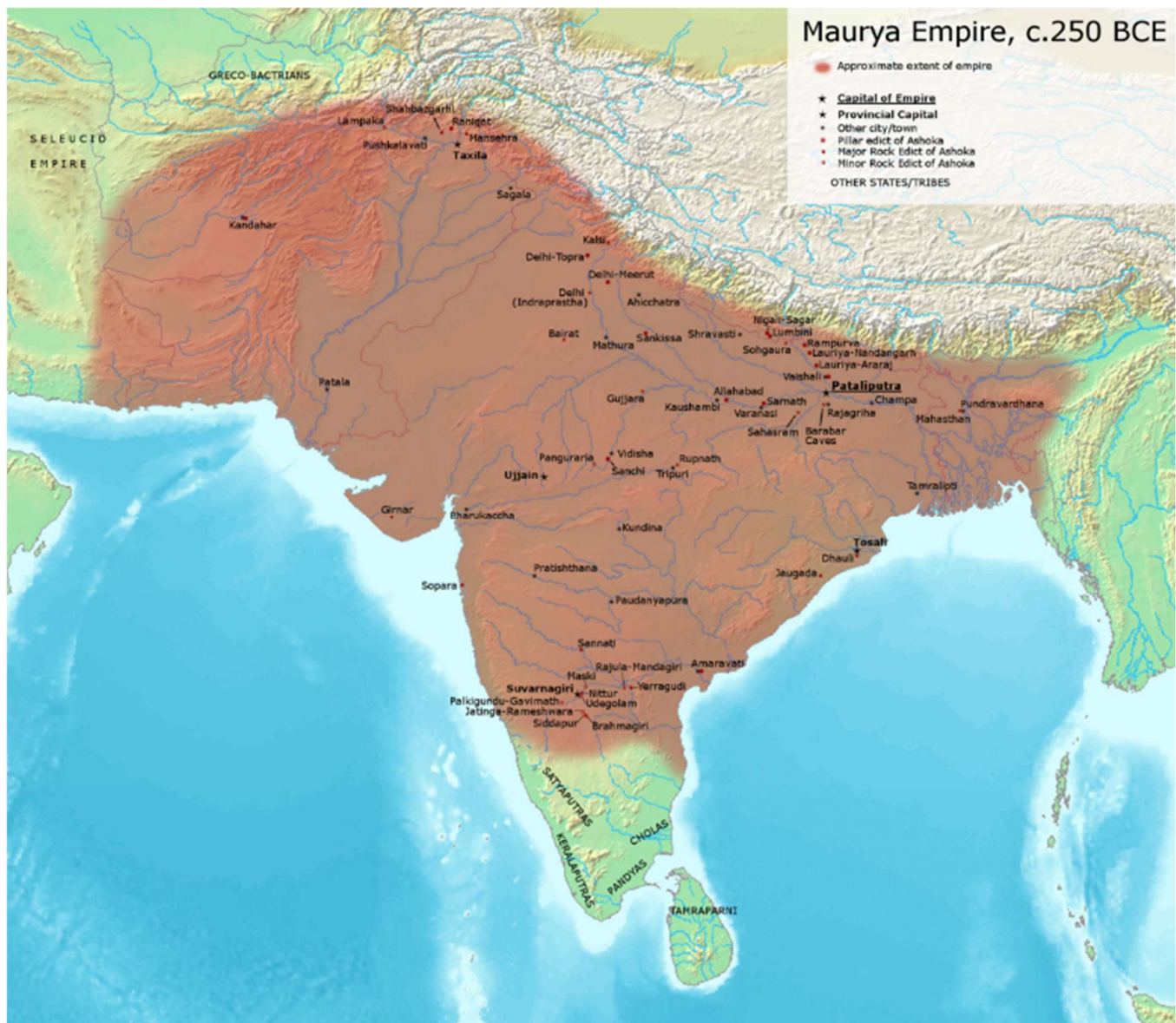


## II. The Classical Indian Empires

Between 1700 BC and 330 BC, India was made up of hundreds of kingdoms that were led by raja who were supported by personal armies. When Alexander the Great conquered the Indus Valley he disrupted the balance of power. When the Greeks abandoned the region a small power vacuum was formed, and Aryan culture began to spread in chaos that followed. The Kingdom of Magadha was one such group. Using their military power, they seized control of a network of trade routes that ran through the Ganges valley and sea routes to the Bay of Bengal.

### The Maurya Empire (342 – 185 BC)

One man called Chandragupta Maurya grew up on the outskirts of Magadha where he grew in military strength and was able to overthrow the Magadha kingdom around 324 BC. He extended his control of the Ganges valley and conquered northwestern India and Bactria (modern day Afghanistan). Taking control of Bactria was no small feat as the region was under the control of the Greeks at the time. **Chandragupta Maurya** went on to unify the Indian subcontinent, establishing the Maurya Empire. He ruled from 324-297 BC and gave the throne over to his son Bindusara who ruled until his death in 272 BC.



The death of Bindusara led to a war between two of his sons that ended in 268 BC. **Ashoka Maurya** emerged victorious and led India to new heights. The military campaigns of the previous rulers meant that the Maurya Empire had a massive military force and an extensive spy network. According to scholars, they boasted 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, and 9,000 war elephants. Most historians agree that this was the largest standing army of this time period. Despite having this much power, Ashoka eventually turned away from offensive warfare and preferred to utilize this military for defense and peacekeeping. The primary reason for this change was a result of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism.



Having witnessed the violence and suffering of war first-hand, Ashoka decided it would be best to end the constant wars to stabilize India, which had known nothing but war for centuries. His conversion also helped Buddhism spread throughout India and Southern and Western Asia. With a strong military securing the empire, interregional trade was possible. The Persian and Macedonian Empires had long established strong connections with India, bringing them access to markets in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, but no ruler was ever able to establish consistent trade due to war. With peace, Ashoka facilitated the Maurya Empire's economic growth through trade. They traded textiles, spices, and ivory to Mesopotamia and even the Roman Republic. There were thousands of products being sold to these regions annually. Records indicate that some elephants were even traded.

Ashoka established the capital of the Maurya Empire in **Pataliputra**, a walled city that would serve as the central hub of the empire. Here, officials ran the central treasury which would fund the military and government. A large but efficient network of bureaucrats, regional governors, and civil servants also operated here. A civil service existed that focused on justice and security for the empire's many merchants, traders, and farmers. To further promote economic growth, Ashoka established a standard currency.

All of these things were in place before Ashoka took control of the empire, established by Chandragupta Maurya, but Ashoka is given much of the credit for the growth of the empire. The reason for this is that Ashoka was able to maintain relative peace in the empire and its neighboring regions, which promoted trade and the growth of culture. The most telling administrative decision made by Ashoka during his rule was the creation of **Pillar Edicts**. These edicts were stone pillars that displayed the laws that governed them. Additionally, Ashoka funded public works projects which included the construction of thousands of roads, canals, and hospitals.

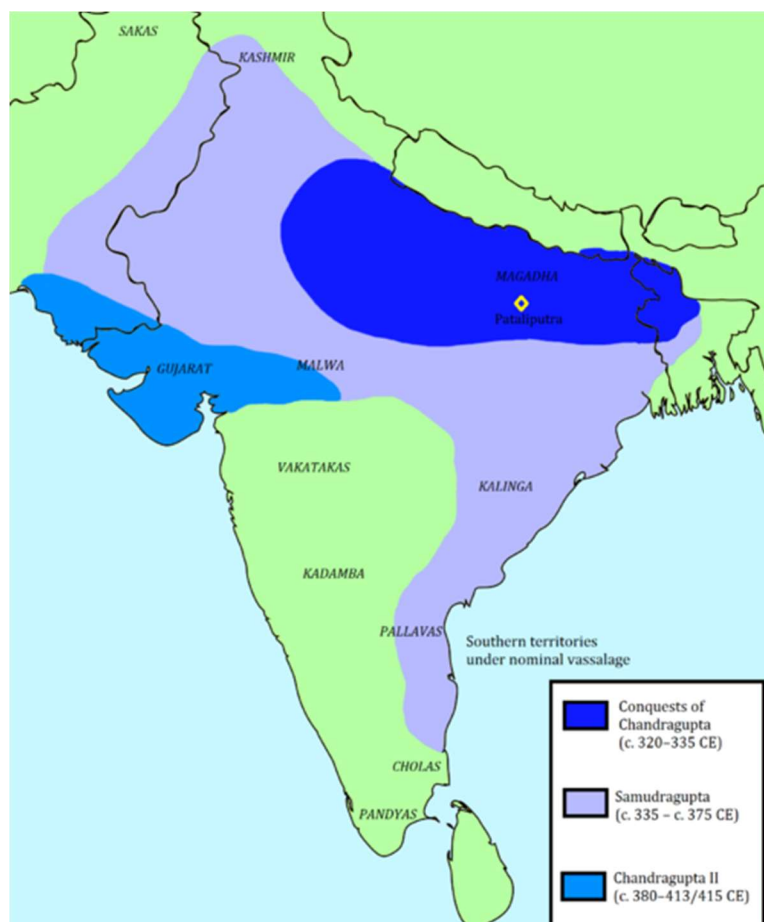




Shortly after the death of Ashoka around 232 BC, the Maurya Empire began to dissolve. The salaries of soldiers and government officials wound up driving the central treasury into the ground. The lack of expansion in the empire meant that local officials were able to gain power, especially those in the smaller regions organized around trade routes. The Mauryan dynasty collapsed around 185 BC.

### **The Gupta Empire (circa AD 240 – 550)**

The Gupta dynasty and later empire was born of the local Mauryan rulers that found power along trade routes. They conquered many of the regions that once made up the Maurya Empire and allied themselves to regions that chose not to challenge them. Though it took many centuries for them to gain a considerable amount of power, the Gupta Empire began to rise sometime after AD 240 under the leadership of Sri Gupta. That's 425 years after the fall of the Maurya Empire.



The Gupta Empire saw considerable growth under its fourth ruler, Samudragupta who reigned from 335 – 375. His successor, Chandragupta II (375 – 415) inherited a rapidly expanding empire. He was not particularly interested in military expansion, but he still became known as Chandra Gupta the Great.

While the Gupta Empire was a successor to the Maurya Empire it was governed very differently. Even though it was smaller overall, it had a decentralized government. In addition to taxes, the Gupta Empire collected tribute from its various allies. Under Chandragupta II, the capital was moved to Pataliputra – as Ashoka did centuries before. However, unlike Ashoka, Chandragupta II allowed the regions of the empire make their own decisions on administration and local affairs. He also expanded the empire through conquest and political marriages.

India. Astronomy, mathematics, and the arts advanced exponentially in this unprecedented age of peace and prosperity. Some of the most notable works to emerge from India in this period were the first approximation of the value of Pi ( $\pi$ ), the creation of works by Kalidasa who is considered the greatest Sanskrit poet and playwright, and the creation of the Panchatantra Fables, one of the most widely-translated non-religious books in history. Hinduism also returned to dominate the region. The return of Hinduism as the predominant religion of the region meant that the Indian social structure became rigid once again. Social mobility became almost impossible.

Women began to lose the rights that they enjoyed in previous years, such as the right to own and inherit property as well as the right to participate in sacred rituals or study religion. Child marriage (involving girls as young as 6 or 7) became the norm as well. The Gupta Empire fell around 550 with the invasion of the White Huns, a nomadic people from central Asia. India would not be unified again until the 1500's.