

South Asia

The civilization of the Indian subcontinent is one of the oldest in the world. Its cultural continuities, and its powerful influence across most of Asia, can be traced from ancient times. India is the home of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Jain religions. Its contributions to Southeast Asian cultures, transmitted through trade and commercial contact, transformed tribal societies of the region into a series of kingdoms in which Indian religions, cosmology, language, notions of kingship, and aesthetic forms flourished. As Buddhism spread to East Asia, Indian iconography and styles of art also had a profound impact on the cultures of Nepal, Tibet, China, and Korea.

South Asia is located at the southern extremity of the Eurasian continent (see the map on page 14). Its landmass is divided into three significant parts. The Northern Mountain rim contains the Himalayas, with twenty of the highest peaks in the world. They are flanked to the west by the Western Ranges bordering Afghanistan, and on the east by the Assam-Burma Ranges. The second physical feature of the subcontinent is the great Indo-Gangetic Plain, named after the Indus and Ganges rivers, which flow through a nearly level landform. South of the Indo-Gangetic Plain is a great uplifted landmass known as the Deccan Plateau, which extends to the southern tip of the subcontinent.

Although the subcontinent was partially isolated from the rest of Asia by the Himalayas, from early times traders pushed through the mountain passes of the Hindu Kush, westward to Asia and to the Mediterranean world beyond, and northeastward to China. India's history was greatly influenced by periodic invasions of peoples from the north and northwest through these same mountain passes. Each time, the invaders and their belief systems were eventually absorbed into the mainstream of Indian civilization, influencing and enriching it in the process. The vast subcontinent was rarely unified and, over the centuries, the many Indian kingdoms that flourished there developed independent aesthetic styles. Nonetheless, certain similarities in content and style can be seen throughout the subcontinent (see pages 24–35).

Rise of the Indus Valley—or Harappa—Civilization: ca. 2500 B.C.

Archaeologists once believed that civilization began in the subcontinent along the Indus River valley in what is now Pakistan. It is now known that this great civilization covered a much larger area, about as large as modern Europe (minus Russia), extending from northern Pakistan to the Arabian Sea and along the tributaries of the Indus River in western India and Pakistan. Excavated sites such as the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro reveal a well-organized system of town planning based on a rectangular street grid. Houses, many two-storied, were provided with drains, washrooms, and latrines; civic and religious buildings, made of mudbrick, were located on walled citadels separated from residential areas. Archaeologists have also found evidence of writing on small stone stamp seals carved with images and a script that has yet to be deciphered (image 1). These seals may have been used to mark ownership of trade products. Mesopotamian and Iranian

image 1

cylinder seals unearthed in the ruins testify to extensive trade with western Asian cultures. The Indus Valley civilization collapsed for unknown reasons some time after 2000 B.C.

Formative Period: 1500–3rd century B.C.

No art or architecture from this period survives, perhaps because it was made with ephemeral materials such as wood and sun-dried brick. However, important philosophical and religious ideas were formulated during this time. The Aryans (meaning “the noble ones” in Sanskrit) began to migrate from Central Asia to the subcontinent about 1500 B.C. They spoke an ancient form of Sanskrit, which became the language of all the great Indic religions. Sanskrit is an Indo-European language related to ancient Greek, Latin, and the modern languages of Europe, including English. With superior weapons and horse-drawn chariots, the Aryans overpowered the indigenous peoples. Their great heritage was literary: the Vedas, hymns to their gods composed before 1000 B.C., contain a rich and complex body of religious and philosophical ideas; the Upanishads (ca. 800–450 B.C.) include philosophical musings about the nature of the divine and of the human soul. Handed down orally for centuries, these beliefs were adopted as the foundation of Hinduism at the beginning of the first millennium.

In the sixth century B.C., Buddhism was founded by the Buddha (born Siddhartha Gautama, ca. 563–483 B.C.) and Jainism by Mahavira (ca. 540–468 B.C.). These religions emerged at a time of great ferment, when philosophers and mystics advanced ideas about correcting the ills of Indian society, including the Brahmins’ exclusive access to the Vedic gods and the strictures of the caste system.

Caste is first mentioned in the Upanishads. Indian society was divided into three strata: a high caste of priests, or Brahmins, who performed all religious rituals; an intermediate caste of warriors (*kshatriyas*); and a lower caste of merchants (*vaishyas*). A fourth caste, defined in the early first millennium A.D., consisted of servants (*shudras*).

The Early Period: 3rd century B.C. – A.D. 1st century

Under the rule of the Mauryas (ca. 323–185 B.C.), the political and cultural life of North India was once again unified under a central authority. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka (272–231 B.C.), a great military leader, conquered a large part of India. As a reaction to the horrors of war, he converted to Buddhism. To bring the Buddha’s teachings to his people, Ashoka built stupas throughout his kingdom. He also introduced a system of writing, which had been absent in India since the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization. When the Mauryan dynasty came to an end in the second century B.C., India was once again divided into smaller kingdoms. However, Buddhism continued to spread, and with it the building of stone stupas and meeting halls.

The Early Buddhist Kingdoms: A.D. 1–early 4th century

In the first century A.D., the Kushans, nomadic warriors from Central Asia, conquered the ancient Gandharan region (which includes parts of modern Pakistan and Afghanistan) and much of northern India. Different styles of art emerged from the two Kushan capitals, one in the Peshawar area of Gandhara and the other at Mathura further southeast in India. The Gandharan style adapted forms from late Hellenistic and Roman art, perhaps a legacy of Alexander the Great's successors in the area, but largely because the major trade routes from the Roman Empire to India and China passed through the region, bringing peoples and ideas from the West (image 4). In contrast, the Mathuran style drew upon the indigenous traditions of India in portraying the human form in robust, rounded volumes symbolizing the fertility of nature. During this period, Buddhist architecture and sculpture proliferated and the iconography of Buddhist images was formulated (image 6).

image 4

image 6

In Andhra, on the southeastern coast of India, the Ikshvaku kingdom (1st–3rd century) prospered through the exchange of goods from local ports on the sea routes to Rome. There, as in Gandhara, Buddhist merchants and devotees financed the building of stupas decorated with narrative stone reliefs (image 5) depicting the Buddha in a distinctive fashion. Andhran Buddhist art influenced the art styles of Sri Lanka (image 9) and images of the Buddha in Andhran style have been found in Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

image 5

image 9

By the end of this period, Buddhism was spreading along the silk route to China and later to Korea and Japan. Along with written accounts of the Buddha's teachings (called sutras), monks and merchants carried small portable works of art—mainly sculptures of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and shrines—which greatly influenced early Chinese and Central Asian Buddhist sculpture.

The Classical Age: early 4th–6th century

The Gupta emperors (4th–6th century) conquered and unified a large portion of northern India and, like the Mughals, created a powerful central state surrounded by kingdoms loyal to it. Under royal patronage, this period became India's classical age of literature, theater, and visual art. The aesthetic canons that came to dominate all the arts of later India were codified during this time. Sanskrit poetry and prose, including the work of the great dramatist Kalidasa, flourished, and the concept of zero was conceived which led to a more practical system of numbering. Arab traders adapted and further developed the concept, and from western Asia the system of "Arabic numerals" traveled to Europe.

The religions of India—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism—flourished under the Guptas. For the first time, there was a great outpouring of Hindu sculpture and architecture, and the forms in which the great gods of Hinduism were portrayed began to be standardized. In the neighboring Vakataka kingdom (5th–7th century), in central India, artists influenced by Gupta aesthetics produced the extraordinary Buddhist rock-cut caves at Ajanta, with their remarkable sculpture and murals. The great power and extent of the Gupta Empire ensured that, even after it had dissolved, its artistic formula would survive in the art of subsequent Indian kingdoms.

Nepal's history had been linked to that of northern India for a long time. Ashoka had built a stupa there. As early as the fourth century, Hinduism and the Gupta style of art were also imported into Nepal. Buddhism and Hinduism continue to have a large following there today.

The Medieval Period: 7th–14th century

image 7

After the breakup of the Gupta dynasty, many smaller kingdoms emerged in both the north and south of the subcontinent. The Pala kingdom of eastern India (9th–12th century), which encompassed the majority of pilgrimage sites associated with the life of the Buddha, was a mecca for pilgrims from throughout Asia. Artists in Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, and Indonesia were profoundly influenced by Pala artistic styles (image 7). In the state of Orissa just to the south, richly decorated temples were constructed throughout this period, culminating with the extraordinary carved stone temple of Konarak (early 13th century). The temple was dedicated to the Hindu god Surya, who was believed to cross the sky each day in a chariot drawn by seven horses. It is actually in the form of a massive chariot, complete with horses and twelve pairs of chariot wheels. Rajput kings in northwest India commissioned many temples, including the Hindu complex at Khajuraho (ca. 945), famous for its sculptural imagery of voluptuous women and loving couples, symbols of good fortune, abundance, and the union of opposites—a metaphor for spiritual transcendence.

image 18, 22

A number of important dynasties, including the Pallava and Pandya (7th–8th century), thrived in South India. Their Hindu temples were built of granite or carved directly from rock. The Pallavas began the tradition of large-scale cast copper processional images of Hindu deities that, under the subsequent Chola dynasty, constitute one of the great artistic achievements of the South India tradition (image 18 and 22).

Buddhism was first introduced in Tibet in the seventh century as a court religion. However, it did not gain popular support until the early eleventh century, when Tibetan Buddhist teachers traveled to India to study at the great monasteries and famous Buddhist teachers were invited to Tibet to reform the practice of Buddhist rituals. The Pala style of eastern India influenced the art of Nepal from the eighth through the twelfth century, but had a more lasting impact in Tibet, from the twelfth through the early fifteenth century. Nepalese art also had a profound influence on that of Tibet from the thirteenth century through the fifteenth. From the fifteenth century onward, the Tibetans forged their own unique style with elements from India, Nepal, and China.

Muslim Invasions: 12th–16th century

Muslim traders and merchants began arriving in India through northwest mountain passes as early as the eighth century, but it was not until the twelfth century that Muslim rulers, backed by armies, gained control in northern India. These early sultans were Turks from Central Asia. The military presence of the Delhi Sultanate (1192–1526), the largest Muslim kingdom, may have saved the subcontinent from the devastating destruction caused by the Mongols throughout western and Central Asia in the thirteenth century.

During the first millennium A.D., Hinduism and Buddhism had existed side by side, and the same aesthetic styles—and often the same artists—were employed by adherents of both. However, by the end of the twelfth century, Buddhism was unable to rebound from the destruction of its most important monasteries by Muslim invaders. Although Buddhism continued to flourish in East and Southeast Asia, it all but died out in India in the thirteenth century. Despite Muslim pressure, Hindu and Jain art continued to be created in India but would never again reach the same levels of inspiration.

As the Delhi Sultanate began to weaken, various Muslim and Hindu petty kingdoms jostled for power. In the sixteenth century, Sikhism was founded in North India in an attempt to reconcile Hinduism with Islam. A monotheistic faith, Sikhs believe that God transcends all religious differences and caste divisions. This was the political situation when the Mughals invaded India.

The Mughal Empire: 1526–1857

The Mughals established an empire that at its peak extended across most of northern India. The name *Mughal* is a corrupt form of *Mongol*, reflecting their Central Asian origin. Babur, the first Mughal ruler, was a descendent of both Genghis Khan and Timur (Tamerlane).

image 30

The Mughal military conquest was directed against both Hindu (Rajput) and Muslim kingdoms and continued through the seventeenth century. However, the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) realized that a policy of tolerance and inclusion would better serve Mughal interests, allowing them to consolidate their conquests and create an effective political system (see image 30). As a way of securing loyalties, members of the Mughal royal family married Rajput royalty, and Rajput maharajas served as Mughal generals and statesmen. Many Indians converted to Islam in order to advance in the powerful Mughal bureaucracy and to participate in their networks of trade to the east and west. Others were attracted to Sufism, an Islamic sect that preached a direct approach to God through love and devotion. Such an approach was remarkably similar to the Hindu belief in *bhakti*, the personal devotion to God. Mughal painting and architecture influenced the indigenous Rajput styles and, by the late seventeenth century, constituted the dominant court style. Although the Mughal dynasty continued until 1857, it gradually lost power and by the second half of the eighteenth century, its function was largely ceremonial.

Contacts with Europe

Vasco de Gama, the Portuguese explorer, sailed around Africa and made landfall on the west coast of India in 1498. Soon, Portuguese merchants had established a trading port at Goa. They introduced from the Americas emeralds treasured by the Mughals, and also chili peppers, which rapidly became a staple seasoning in India's various cuisines because of their preservative powers. Soon to follow the merchants were Jesuit priests equipped with European prints and Bibles and eager to convert the Mughal rulers. Although intrigued with Christian beliefs and examples of European art, Mughal emperors beginning with Akbar (r. 1556–1605) were much more interested in establishing trade relations with Europe. They exported

textiles, spices, and gems but acquired very few European goods in exchange, preferring instead payment in gold and silver, which increased their wealth immensely and enabled the court to indulge in luxurious and highly refined works of art. For their part, Europeans found it easy to comply with this demand because they had plentiful supplies of these metals from South American mines.

European civilization was beginning to blend and interact with the equally rich heritages of ancient India and Islam, a process that continues in South Asia today. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British vied for trading advantages and began to establish inland trading centers as well as ports along the coast. As so often in the past, the Mughals and the smaller Muslim and Hindu kingdoms failed to unite against these intrusions. During the second half of the eighteenth century, the British overcame their European competitors, gradually gaining control of the divided remnants of the Mughal Empire and what was left of the smaller kingdoms. By the middle of the nineteenth century, almost the entire subcontinent was united for the first time under colonial rule, represented by the British Raj.

Independence

Increasing support for independence culminated with the nonviolent protests led by Gandhi. Independence finally came in 1947 and with it division into two states, India and Pakistan, along religious lines. The vast majority of India's citizens are Hindu, although there is a large population of Muslims and small numbers of Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians, and Jews. Pakistan is mainly Muslim. Bangladesh split off from Pakistan in 1971, forming the second Muslim nation in South Asia.