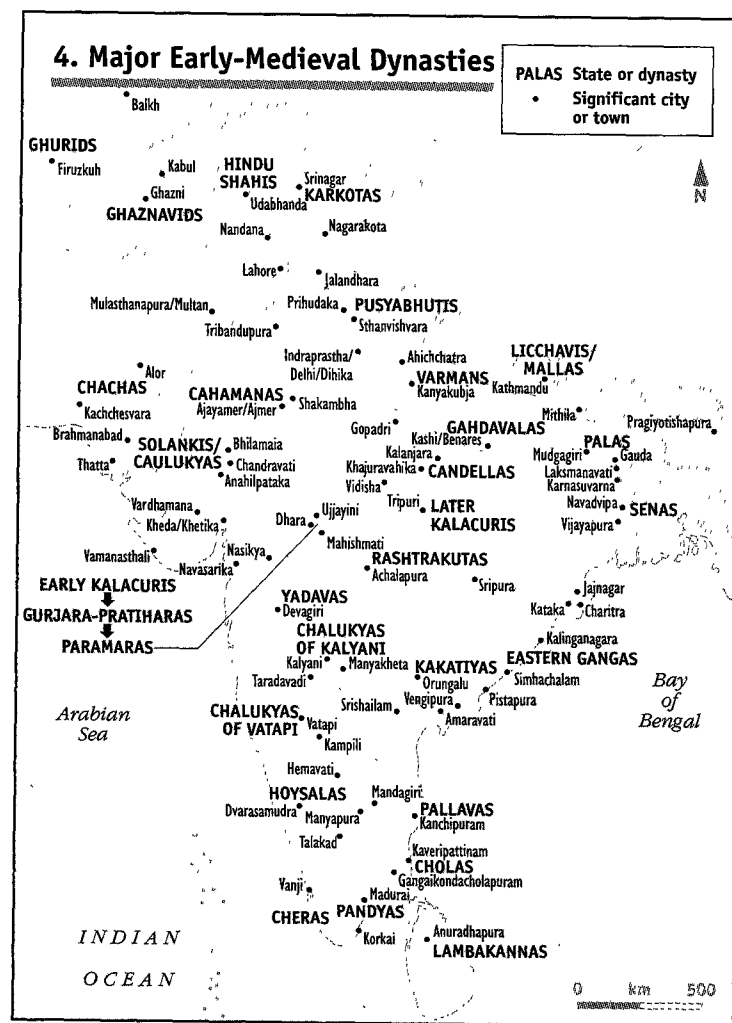




connected to wide-spreading circuits of trade, culture, and politics. Each dynasty had a strong territorial identity that was concentrated in a specific core region, and when military expansion reached its limit, dynasties retreated into their homeland, unless they were driven out, which would often be followed by the creation of a new

homeland elsewhere. Over time, compact regional dynasties spread widely and they often produced permanent regional traditions preserved in monuments, literature, mythology, genealogies, and local rights and powers granted by medieval kings.

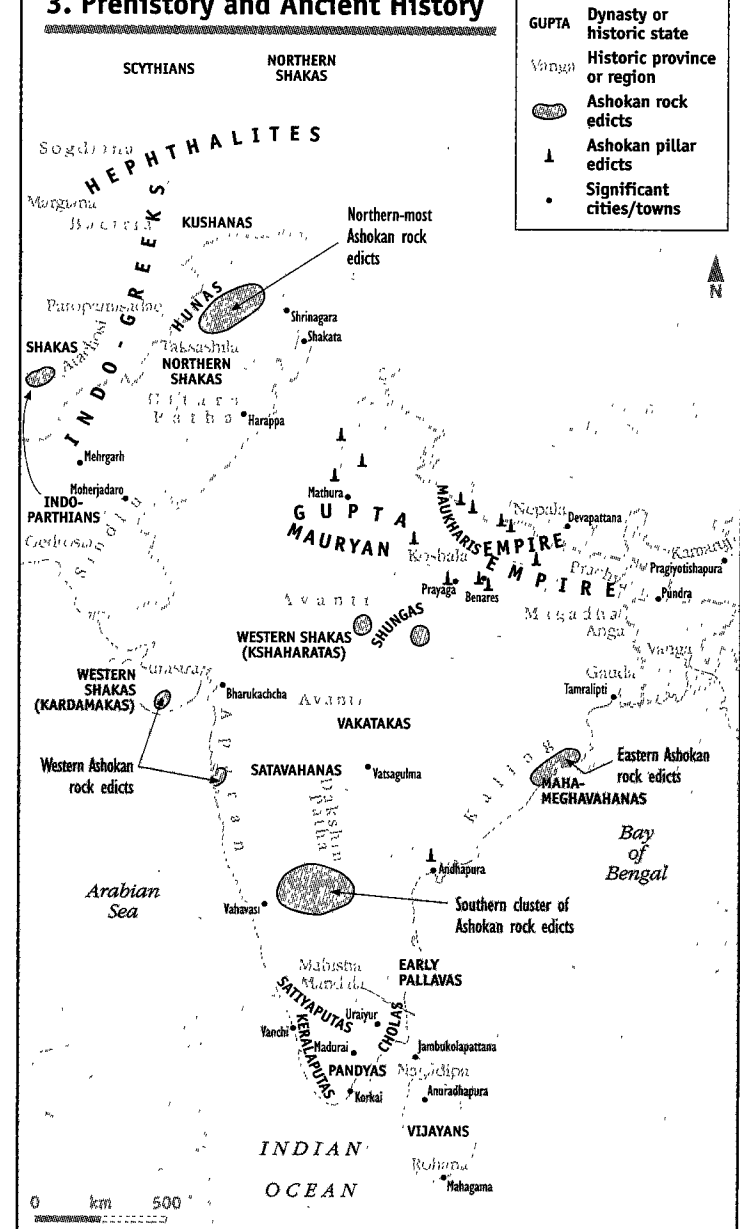
Many medieval dynasties emerged on routes running to and from ancient *Bharat*. Ancient empires had produced networks of conquest, elite circulation, and cultural communication on long routes of mobility through the Ganga basin. Dispersed urban centres of late antiquity developed around army posts, administrative offices, markets, oases, ports, strategic mountain passes and river crossings, sacred sites, royal courts, lineage headquarters, stupas, monasteries, and other places valued by imperial elites. Habitation and land use had intensified around cities where agro-pastoralism and shifting cultivation spawned permanent farming, manufacturing, and commerce. When political leaders in imperial satellite towns challenged imperial elites for local leadership, vying for local support, new regional polities emerged with political cultures that combined local parochialism and imperial cosmopolitanism.

The Pallava regime at Kanchipuram is a useful example. It emerged from under the canopy of empire thrown across the southern peninsula by the imperial Guptas, Vakatakas and Chalukyas. Pallava kings rose from vassal status to become imperial powers in their own right. Kanchipuram had been a centre of Buddhist learning featured in *Manimekalai*, a Buddhist epic composed in the Tamil language in Gupta times, when Pallavas were Vakataka feudatories. Under the Pallavas, Kanchipuram became a Hindu sacred site and a royal capital; its seaport, Mahaballipuram, was adorned with monumental rock sculpture and temple carvings popularizing the worship of the supreme Hindu gods Siva and Vishnu. The Pallavas' Kanchipuram became a Hindu pilgrimage site and centre for Sanskrit learning, whose temples received endowments from dignitaries and gifts from patrons in localities around the peninsula. On its temple walls, dynastic inscriptions record a Pallava cosmic genealogy and wars of imperial expansion that spawned Pandya and Chola regimes farther south. Ancient imperial authority was slowly transformed in this manner into dozens of new medieval regimes across the expansive frontiers of late antiquity.

- Rathors (1200s–1500s), in Ujjaini, Ajayameru (Ajmer), and Jodhpur, respectively.
5. Gujarat: Caulukyas (900s–1200s) were the dominant medieval dynasty.
6. Uttar Pradesh: major dynasties included Hunas (500s); Maukharis (500s) at Kanyakubja and Ayodhya; Pusyabutis (500s–840s), whose most famous ruler was Harsha of Kanauji; Varmas (700s); and Gurjara-Pratiharas (700s–1150s), who spread from Gujarat to Bengal.
7. Madhya Pradesh: Candellas (800s–1300s) spread across a region including Khajurao, Awadh, and Gorakhpur; and Kalacuris (500s–1200s) covered land from Kheda and Ujjaini to Tripuri and Bengal.
8. Maharashtra: divided among Vakatakas (200s–500s) at Vidarbha (Nagpur), Kalacuris (500s–1200s) at Nasik, Rashtrakutas (600s–900s) at Vidarbha, and Yadavas (800s–1300s) at Devagiri.
9. Orissa: Gangas at Kataka Bhuvanesvara (300s–1400s) were the longest-lasting dynasties.
10. Bengal: Palas (750s–1100s) and Senas (100–1200s) defined the medieval epoch.
11. Andhra Pradesh: Eastern Chalukyas ruled from the Krishna-Godavari delta (620s–1000s); Kakatiyas ruled from the interior at Warangal, near Hyderabad (1000s–1300s).
12. Karnataka: Chalukyas (500s–750s) at Vatapi (Badami) gave way to the imperial Hoysalas (1000s–1300s) whose domain stretched to the east and west coasts; and later to the greatest southern empire at Vijayanagar (1336–1672).
13. Tamil Nadu: Pallavas (300s–900s), Cholas (800s–1200s), and Pandyas (600s–1300s) ruled the northern, central, and southern regions of the coast at Kanchipuram, Tanjavur, and Madurai respectively.
14. Kerala: the Cheras and Kulasekaras ruled the region around Trivandrum from the fourth to the twelfth century.
15. Sri Lanka: Lambakanna dynasties ruled from later Mauryan times to the twelfth century.

The original establishment of most of the medieval dynasties appears to represent emerging concentrations of wealth and power among warrior and landowning elites in areas of agricultural expansion. These agrarian regimes were deeply rooted locally but they were often spatially expansive and they were all extensively

3. Prehistory and Ancient History



descended from the Hsung-nu clans in China; like the Sakas and Hunas, they were aliens in Aryavarta who represented a radical alternative to the Guptas, carrying Buddhism with them along the Silk Road.

When Chinese Buddhists toured India in the fifth and seventh centuries, they found that Buddhism had virtually disappeared in its Gangetic homeland under the imperial force of Brahmanism, though it still thrived in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Outside the Ganga basin, however, cultures flourished across the length and breadth of South Asia that were markedly less Brahmanical. Culturally distinct regimes based outside the Brahmanical strongholds in the Gupta heartland struggled constantly against Gangetic imperialism and for control over *Bharat*.

Aryavarta was one region among others in ancient, medieval, and early-modern times. Outside the geographical confines of imperial *Bharat*, political histories and collective identities flowing from them followed different trajectories. In the south, in the Deccan, in ancient Dakshinapatha, south of the Vindhyas, dynasties of Satavahanas, Vakatakas, Kalacuris, Rashtrakutas, and Yadavas conquered and defined cultural regions in central India; and in the seventeenth century, the Marathas followed suit, as we will see. In the west, in Rajasthan, Gurjara-Pratihara lineages launched five hundred years of military colonization in the ninth century, when Rajput clans conquered all across the Ganga basin, into the Himalayas and central India to form a long-lasting, far-reaching political and cultural force. In the north-west, in the land that straddles Punjab, Kashmir, and Afghanistan, Kushanas and later Turks and Afghans produced imperial spaces that repeatedly encompassed the Ganga basin and laid the historic basis for the sixteenth-century Mughal Empire, whose land ran from Samarkand to Assam.

MEDIEVAL TRANSITIONS

Post-Gupta regimes produced a fundamentally new mosaic of social environments; in recognition of this, historians treat the centuries from *circa* 550 to 1556, spanning the empires of the Guptas and Mughals, as a coherent, though very diverse, medieval epoch. One dominant feature of this epoch is increasingly dense and diverse documentation in dozens of languages, media, and regions. By comparison to earlier times, medieval history is very well documented, and its principal protagonists are better known, because

inscriptions, travel accounts, chronicles, literature, and other sources multiply with each passing century. In the first millennium, the most visible characters appear in the texts of inscriptions produced by medieval dynasties. Hundreds of thousands of inscriptions have been located, copied, stored, translated, and studied by scholars, but still have not received the attention they deserve. The medieval millennium needs many more historians.

Epigraphy indicates that royal Gupta lineages were still settling in the western frontiers of Aryavarta in the sixth century, when the empire crumbled. They carried the apparatus of Gupta power, using royal gifts to finance temples and Brahmins; such gifts became a hallmark of medieval royalty. To mark the end of Gupta supremacy, a new Maukhari dynasty made grants in their own name on the western edge of the Gupta heartland, around Kanyakubja (Kanauj), in the Doab (Awadh). Then the Pusyabutis did the same farther west along the Yamuna and in Haryana. In the seventh century, the Pusyabuti king Harsha moved his capital to Kanyakubja and celebrated the event with a land grant to two Brahmins. The grant was to be administered personally by one of his commanders under the official protection of the *janapadas* in his realm. This indicates that the *janapada* lineages were still in power, and that Harsha relied for his authority on the wealth and power of subordinates supported by local community leaders.

Inscriptions announce the formation of more than forty new dynasties in the sixth and seventh centuries, across the length and breadth of South Asia. Typical *prasastis* include elaborate genealogies that trace dynastic origins to mythical progenitors and sanctify royal domains by harking back to ancient kings. Regional societies become more historically visible in these centuries, and many medieval dynasties laid foundations for long-lasting regional political cultures. The complexity of medieval political geography can be sketched out by locating major dynasties in fifteen modern political regions (see Map 2).

1. Kashmir: Karkotas (620s–850s) and Loharas (900s–1300s) were based in the Vale, around Srinagar.
2. Nepal: Licchavis (400s–700s) and Mallas (900s–1700s) ruled the Kathmandu Valley.
3. Punjab: a contested terrain where Shahis (900s–1100s) built a major medieval domain.
4. Rajasthan: Gurjara-Pratiharas gave way to ruling dynasties of Paramaras (800s–1300s), Cahamanas (900s–1100s), and

'oldness' or 'venerability' in genealogies and tales of the misty past, combining myth, folklore, history, and historical fiction. A typical *purana* begins with the creation of the world and narrates a genealogy leading from heavenly gods to earthly kings and saints in some present time that can be mythical but also historical, as it is in the genre of *sthala purana*, which explains how a particular god came to reside in a specific temple. *Puranas* have their mundane, factual counterpart in *prasasti* introductions to inscriptions that record temple donations, land grants, and royal proclamations.

Ashokan edicts and Samudragupta's inscriptions were prototypes for millions of texts carved in stone and etched in metal that begin to appear by Gupta times and proliferate from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries. *Prasastis* recount genealogies and dynastic chronicles: though they often begin in the heavens in mythical times, they always come down to earth to the moment of the activity announced in the inscription. Like *puranas*, *prasastis* are typically in Sanskrit, though *puranas* were also composed in vernaculars, and inscriptions introduced by Sanskrit *prasastis* typically include a vernacular text for the business or contractual portion of the record. *Puranas* and *prasastis* are two major textual media for evoking relations among gods, rulers, and everyday folk, thus between cosmic and mundane power.

The Guptas invested heavily in Puranic mythology and inscriptional documentation. Later, rulers all over South Asia followed their example to produce inscriptional records in all the major languages, including Arabic and Persian. These texts provide a clear sense of cultural geography. In the accumulation of Puranic texts, Aryavarta became the *desa*, the cultured land of civilization where Prayaga (Allahabad) and Kasi (Varanasi/Benares) were the holiest places in the sacred geography of *Bharat*. The *desa* does not include the high mountains, Indus Valley, Punjab, or western desert. The Puranic *desa* of *Bharat* are *Madhya desa* (the Ganga lowlands), *Purva desa* (Bengal and Assam), and *Aparanta desa* (including Avanti, Malwa, Gujarat, Konkan, and Nasik). Places outside the *desa* were frontiers and peripheries. The western plains, Punjab, high mountains, central mountains, and coast and interior peninsula outside Nasika-Konkana are not called *desa* in *puranas*, but rather *asreya*, *patha*, and *pristha*. This Puranic geography travelled widely with migrating Brahman literati. Sanskrit cosmopolitanism made Aryavarta its cultural heartland. With the spread of Brahman influence in post-Gupta centuries, localities far and wide were named and located in relation to the Gangetic holy lands. Kings as

far away as Java and Cambodia traced their genealogies to the Guptas and even to the early Aryans.

REGIONS OF IMPERIAL EXPANSION

The ancient empires in the Ganga basin were surrounded by competitors in other regions whose power increased over the centuries. The Mauryas had faced no serious obstacles in their quest for control of major routes and centres east of the Hindu Kush. But when the last Maurya fell and the Sungas took Pataliputra, in 185 BCE, new empires on Magadha's old western frontier foreshadowed a new kind of future. In the south, in Maharashtra, the Satavahanas (55 BCE–250 CE) conquered the Deccan and the eastern peninsula south to Kanchipuram. In the western plains, the Sakas (70–409) expanded south and west into Gujarat from their capital at Ujjaini in Malwa. In the north-west, the Kushanas (0–250) formed the greatest of the new empires. They came from Central Asia and had twin capitals at Purusapura and Mathura. They conquered Afghanistan and the Ganga basin east to Pataliputra. Their most powerful ruler, Kanishka, also conquered the Sakas and the Satavahanas. Non-Gangetic armies formed a strenuous opposition to Gupta expansion outside Aryavarta. The Hunas, Sakas, and Vakatakas hemmed the Guptas in throughout their reign, and competitors tore their realm to bits when the Hunas rampaged down the Ganga to end the era of Gupta supremacy.

After the Guptas, empires ruling the old imperial heartlands of the Mauryas and the Guptas came from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, which were markedly different from the Ganga basin as material and cultural environments. Agricultural land was not nearly as rich. Nomadic pastoral lineages were much more numerous, powerful, and prestigious. Elites were less sedentary and land-based; they depended more on trade, herds, and war for wealth; and their military control over routes between Delhi and Kabul and between Allahabad and Cambay provided a permanent strategic advantage in struggles for access to markets in Persia, Central Asia, and Indian Ocean ports. They often patronized Brahman but they were typically eclectic, less inclined to Vedic ritual, and more respectful of nomadic warriors and itinerant merchants. Buddhism and Jainism flourished in their domains. Even the Satavahanas, who were staunch Hindus, also patronized Buddhists. Jainism remained prominent in Gujarat and Rajasthan. All along the Indian Ocean coast, Zoroastrians, Christians, Arabs, and Jews became well established. The Kushanas

primarily of diplomatic missions. Buddhist activity was particularly prominent in the east, from Bengal down the Orissa coast to Amaravati, Kanchipuram, Madurai, and Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka.

Buddhism and Jainism continued to expand their influence after the fall of the last Mauryas in 185 BCE. Centuries of imperial competition produced expansive dynasties which broke the Mauryas' dynastic authority and ushered in a new set of rulers based in regions all around the eastern Gangetic heartland of *Bharat* (Table 1). In the first centuries CE, Buddhism travelled with warrior Kushanas across the Silk Road to China, became the state religion in Anuradhapura, and spawned monasteries and literatures in various languages on all its routes of travel. Jainism became a permanent cultural presence in Rajasthan and Gujarat, and on trade routes in the southern peninsula.

In 320 CE, four hundred years after the fall of the Mauryas, a new imperial dynasty arose in their eastern Ganga heartland and proceeded to inscribe ancient *Bharat* with Brahmanical authority. The founder, Chandragupta, apparently renamed himself after Chandragupta Maurya. He began his imperial career by marrying a daughter of the Licchavi clan, which had controlled the Terai uplands between Magadha and Nepal since before Mauryan times and would later go on to form a dynasty in the Kathmandu Valley. With this alliance, he conquered westward along the path of the Mauryas. In the late fourth century, his son, Samudragupta, declared himself *maharaja adhi raja*, 'great king of kings', and boldly recounted his conquests on a pillar in Prayaga (Allahabad) which dates back to the Mauryas. The Allahabad inscription divides Gupta lands into four categories. At the centre is Aryavarta, including all the Ganga plain, Naga domains in Bundelkhand and Malwa, Kota lands around Delhi, and Pundravardhana and Vanga in Bengal. Inside Aryavarta, conquered rulers were said to have been brought under direct Gupta administration. Outside this imperial territory, in the southern regions of Dakshinapatha, twelve conquered kings were left on their thrones. In the mountains, unconquered rulers paid tribute. In the north and west, Kushanas and Mundas offered obeisance, as did Sinhala kings in Sri Lanka.

Aryavarta was imperial territory suffused with Brahmanism. Samudragupta built its military framework by conquering the *janapadas* to replace them with imperial officers. Gupta territory was anchored in armed cities and towns, but also in rituals and holy places, forming a terrestrial order that was also a mythical universe. Aryavarta invoked eternal cosmic authority. Protected by

Gupta armies and patronized by officials at every level, imperial Brahmanism subdued all competitors.

Gupta imperial society spread across the Gangetic lowlands. Its core region was much larger than the Mauryas', extending west to Mathura, and its cultural impact was deeper and more permanent. To consecrate Aryavarta, Samudragupta performed Vedic rituals on a grand scale and pursued a widely publicized policy of donating land to Brahmans, funding temple construction, and financing temple rituals. Not surprisingly, Brahman authors saw the fall of the Guptas in the sixth century CE as the onset of cosmic chaos and degradation, or *Kali Yuga*. Many later generations of Sanskrit authors saw the Gupta era as their golden age. *Bharat* thus acquired a classical culture, defined by Brahmans in Sanskrit. The Gupta core region in Uttar Pradesh still has the highest Brahman population in India, and the most actively Brahmanical politicians.

Brahmanism spread outward from the Gupta core and evolved into a diverse but coherent Hindu cultural complex which travelled with Brahman migrations across South Asia and overseas into South-East Asia. Exactly how this cultural complex spread to influence so many disparate societies is still far from fully understood, partly because most of its huge textual record was produced by its proponents, in Sanskrit and other languages. Clearly, Brahmans and Sanskrit were critical in the production of Hindu societies. When Panini codified Sanskrit, it was already an archaic language; he effectively compiled a codebook for a Brahman secret tongue, a user's guide for Brahman cultural software. Buddhist and Jain authors used Pali, Prakrits, and other vernaculars. Local cults expressed themselves in local vernaculars. The influence of Sanskrit spread with the influence of learned Brahman men who were the only people who could officially know the language of the gods and convey its magic. Elements of Sanskrit – its sounds, words, grammar, and script – could be learnt, used, and enjoyed by anyone, however, so that over time, they entered most languages in southern Asia; and translations out of Sanskrit conveyed its influence into literature more widely still. Until the seventeenth century, when it was partially displaced by Persian as the premier elite imperial language, Sanskrit enjoyed a status comparable to Latin in Europe as an elite language of law, ritual, science, philosophy, literature, and high culture generally.

Patronage for the Brahman literati spread their influence far and wide. The Gupta classical age emerged retrospectively, in Puranic literature. *Puranas* form a large corpus of texts that recount

people were those who participated in imperial rituals and commanded the language and culture of the imperial religion. The lowest-status people were those who spoke only local tongues and worshipped local deities. Social mobility among tiers of culture led local people up the imperial ranks as they embraced elite culture, giving it local roots.

The project of civilizing conquered peoples proceeded within empire as influential people established religious institutions in dispersed local societies. Buddhists and Jains seem to have been most successful among merchants. A Greek king of Punjab, Menander, adopted Buddhism and sought to bring more merchants into his realm. Ashoka made Buddhism a moral compass, which made his realm more attractive for merchants. In Mauryan times, kings, monks, and landed elites on the island of Sri Lanka came together under the banner of *dharmma* to create one of the world's most enduring Buddhist kingdoms. Elsewhere, too, religious institutions became central in cultural politics by bringing disparate groups together in new, more extensive regional communities. Pious donors sanctified their own wealth with spending on festivals, shrines, temples, stupas, or pious education; they used public religious rituals to announce their own beneficence. Religious communities formed as emerging social elites pursued their common interests in stability to forge shared identities with public piety.

Donations to Jains and Buddhists became increasingly popular among merchants who travelled routes protected by Mauryan armies. Merchant wealth flowed into religious centres in market towns where it combined with royal patronage to finance a spiritual realm of public sentiment, which brought together local elites and imperial officers, itinerants and residents, civilians and army commanders, and many other people in various professions. Buddhist and Jain sculpture became public art. Gigantic stone sculptures and buildings embodied the physical presence of spiritual and imperial power. Technologies of artistic beauty became media for the everyday experience of spirituality, transcendence, and political stability. A creative explosion in all the arts was a most remarkable feature of this ancient transformation, a permanent cultural legacy. Mauryan territory was created in its day by awesome armies and dreadful war, but future generations would cherish its beautiful pillars, inscriptions, coins, sculptures, buildings, ceremonies, and texts, particularly later Buddhist writers.

Ancient imperialism created a new kind of social space, an imperial landscape. But all around it, most people lived in agro-pastoral

communities and lineages, like those in the *janapadas*, dominated most localities. The geography of the Mauryan Empire resembled a spider with a small dense body and long spindly legs. The highest echelons of imperial society lived in the inner circle composed of the ruler, his immediate family, other relatives, and close allies, who formed a dynastic core. Outside the core, empire travelled stringy routes dotted with armed cities. Outside the palace, in the capital cities, the highest ranks in the imperial elite were held by military commanders whose active loyalty and success in war determined imperial fortunes. Wherever these men failed or rebelled, dynastic power crumbled. In the provincial urban centres of imperial authority, administrators applied official rules, merchants cherished law and order, elites gathered wealth, and pious people received patronage: all these groups carried imperial identities into everyday life.

Imperial society flourished where elites mingled; they were its backbone, its strength was theirs. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* indicates that imperial power was concentrated in its original heartland, in old Magadha, where key institutions seem to have survived for about seven hundred years, down to the age of the Guptas. Here, Mauryan officials ruled local society, but not elsewhere. In provincial towns and cities, officials formed a top layer of royalty; under them, old conquered royal families were not removed, but rather subordinated. In most *janapadas*, the Mauryan Empire consisted of strategic urban sites connected loosely to vast hinterlands through lineages and local elites who were there when the Mauryas arrived and were still in control when they left.

IMPERIAL BHARAT

The Mauryas defined an ancient territory called *Bharat*. Marching along old trade routes, the empire acquired the geometrical shape of a tall triangle with a broad base, with its apex in Magadha. One long northern leg ran west up the Ganga, across Punjab, into the Hindu Kush; and one long leg ran south-west from Pataliputra, up the Son river valley, down the Narmada River into Berar, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. The broad base spanned Punjab, the Indus, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and western Maharashtra. The north-western frontier revolved around Gandhara and Kashmir; the south-western frontier around Nasika, now Nasik, in Maharashtra. North of Kashmir and west of the Khyber Pass, Greek dynasties held sway. South of Nasika, the Mauryan presence consisted

Brahman priest; his arms became the warrior (Rajanya or Kshatriya); his thighs became the Vaisya (farmer and merchant); and his feet became the Sudra (servant). Ancient landowners, merchants, warriors, army commanders, rulers, kings, and emperors used Brahmanical interpretations of *varna* to raise and validate their social status. Thus many elites became at least partially Aryanized by patronizing Brahman knowledge and rituals. Many aspiring groups collaborated with Brahmans to create a higher status for themselves. Brahmanism allowed kin groups to form caste groups (*jati*) by assigning each kin group to a *varna*. The *dharmasastra* texts defined an emerging Brahmanical order, most famously *The Laws of Manu*, circa 100 BCE, which explains in great detail how every marriage mixing *jatis* produces a new *jati* with a specific status in the *varna* ranks, thus providing a recipe for organizing complex, diverse, and changing societies into an ideological scheme in which everyone acquires a ranked position.

Jain and Buddhist philosophies, monks, and patrons opposed the social stratification prescribed by Brahmanism, and the spiritual authority of the Brahmans and Vedic rites. Both schools of thought and spiritual discipline arose east of Prayaga, around Magadha, where Mahavira (born circa 550) and Gautama Buddha (born circa 480) originally preached. It is reasonable to surmise that both represent restless spiritual aspirations among new elites who challenged Vedic ideas about social rank. Merchants relegated to lower *varna* ranks were clearly influential patrons for Buddhist and Jain monks, who propagated the spiritual power of learning, piety, merit, discipline, and ethical values and rejected the idea that complete spiritual purity is attainable only by Brahmans. Jain and Buddhist paths to liberation are open to everyone.

Supporters of Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism moved along routes of mobility and communication that extended their influence under the Mauryas. Imperial elites circulated among localities and settled to become representatives of imperial authority and high culture. Locally, their elite status could attract patronage from aspiring donors who sought prized intermediary roles in imperial society. People could only appreciate high culture when it was translated into local terms, in the vernacular. Most local religious feelings, practices, and ideas could never attain wide currency; they remained local until they were translated into terms that could travel. A three-tiered cultural hierarchy thus developed. At the top, high culture emerged among imperial elites

who communicated with one another across great distances at the apex of political authority. Intermediary elites arose in regions of political power as they translated and mixed imperial and local cultures. But many local cultural elements remained just that, out of imperial circuits of power though incorporated by and subordinated to them. Thus the idea of 'great' and 'little' traditions came into being with the expansion of empire and with efforts by aspiring local elites to lift themselves out of their existing status. The interaction of these three levels of culture became a basic feature of social life. They are visible even today, though the centuries have changed their significance. In ancient times, local cultures were overwhelmingly predominant and very few people had access to high culture and elite traditions. Imperial culture made its impact locally in proportion to the power of its patrons in society.

Buddhism exemplifies high culture on the move in ancient times. It spread widely as the elites sank local roots, travelling from town to town in the ambit of Mauryan power and along routes of mobility running into Central Asia, the southern peninsula, and Sri Lanka. Buddhists always confronted opposition from Jains and Brahmans, and everywhere, patronage from various sources decided the outcome of their competition. Ashoka's patronage indicates that rulers in his day devised ingenious means for turning empire into civilization. Giving financial and moral support to high-culture ideas, practices, and intellectuals enabled rulers to attract literate elites to their service and to bring cosmopolitan cultural activists into localities of ethical empire. At the same time, this strategy enabled conquerors to turn tribute from vanquished local warriors into pious generosity. Religious patronage enhanced political supremacy and imperial authority. Instead of suffering humiliating military defeat, a weaker rival could embrace the imperial ranks by negotiating an acceptable contribution to charitable cultural projects endorsed by the emperor.

Such ingenious cultural politics suffused social struggles for power and rank. For rulers, patronizing religious leaders and institutions became indispensable for gaining local support. In everyday life, religious institutions shaped social identities under imperial patronage. Spiritual leaders became socially prominent as they cultivated patronage and turned wealth into moral authority. In local society, financing cultural institutions and religious activities such as festivals and rituals became an indicator of social status. Social rank thus acquired aesthetic, spiritual forms. The highest-status

that eventually deployed 9,000 elephants, 30,000 cavalry, 8,000 chariots, and 600,000 infantry on its many battlefields. Supporting its war machine with taxes, troops, provisions, commanders, and victories preoccupied the Maurya state, which sustained an official elite that was the first of its kind. Elite intellectuals writing in Sanskrit composed imperial texts. One legendary figure was Kautilya, known as the original author of the *Arthashastra*, a manual of statecraft and administration, which was not completed until the Gupta age, six hundred years later, forming one of many links between the two ancient dynasties that together produced the imperial substance of what became known as classical civilization.

Mauryan armies conquered widely from 321 until 260 BCE. Chandragupta marched west to the Hindu Kush and Kashmir. His son, Bindusara, turned south to the Deccan. After a four-year war of succession, emperor Ashoka conquered Kalinga, on the Orissa coast, where war exhausted imperial resources. Subduing Kalinga cost 100,000 lives and displaced twice as many people. This suffering apparently stunned Ashoka into embracing Buddhism. The Mauryan elite then invented a new, ethical imperialism. By Ashoka's time, the teachings of Gautama Buddha and Mahavira had defined distinctive strains of cultural activity that we know under the names of Buddhism and Jainism; they shared many elements with Aryan Brahmanism but opposed its sacred division of caste society and established another set of values for rulers, including universal ethical norms that made salvation a moral quest. Rulers could support this righteous vision by becoming great alms-givers for learned monks who preached harmonious moral order and showed the way to enlightenment with their piety and learning. Buddhist righteousness (*dhamma*) became a moral compass for Ashoka's empire. Ashoka used vast winnings from war to support Buddhist monks, ritual centres (stupas), preachers, and schools. Instead of conquering the kingdoms south of Kalinga, Ashoka brought them under his spiritual patronage, supporting Buddhist kings in Sri Lanka and Buddhist centres in Andhra, Karnataka, and the Tamil country. Jain missions also prospered in Ashoka's imperial domain.

Maurya dynastic elites invented imperial culture, including new social identities attached to imperial expansion, integration, and authority. As well as supporting its war machine, the empire constituted an ethical ideology and infrastructure. In addition to commanding armies and gathering wealth for war, generals

announced the arrival of good governance wherever they conquered. In addition to collecting tribute, officers established a local presence to keep roads open, adjudicate disputes, and supersede the parochial power of the *janapadas*. Building on the legacy of Magadha and initially travelling the same routes, the Maurya regime protected merchants who were major patrons of Buddhism and Jainism. Empire increased the concentration of wealth at central places of imperial authority. It attracted ambitious lineage leaders and disgruntled local competitors who allied with imperial officers and identified themselves with imperial authority. Imperial culture fostered a new elite cosmopolitanism, which elevated its own people and ideas as it reduced the authority of localities and local leaders. Empire institutionalized 'high' and 'low' culture at the same time.

DESIGNING CIVILIZATION

In new territories of empire and elite formation, Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism represented three solutions to fundamental problems of human existence and political order. Their proponents obtained royal patronage in the circuits of urbane cosmopolitanism. All three became more prominent in dispersed localities on the tracks of imperial expansion. They had much in common, including their vast cosmology and their complex ideas about reincarnation and *karma* (the effect of acts in past lives on future lives). They all emerged in the Ganga basin from the mixing of Aryan culture with other cultures during social change in the first millennium BCE. Their intellectuals shared the creative spirit of the Upanishads, later Vedic texts which depict the sacred powers produced in the fires of Vedic sacrifice as being available to empower human transcendence through spiritual discipline, renunciation, contemplation, and mysticism.

By the later centuries BCE, elements of Aryan ideology had been adapted variously to local conditions by elites in diverse agrarian societies. The Brahmanas codified Vedic ritual in the changing contexts where learned Brahmins embodied and translated Aryan tradition. Newly emerging social elites used Sanskrit texts and Vedic rituals, and learned Brahmins began to elevate themselves above others and to institutionalize ranks of privilege. One hymn from the *Rg Veda* became particularly useful. It describes the origin of the world in the sacrificial dismemberment of the Lord of Being, Prajapati, into four *varna* or human essences: his mouth became the

of the mountains provided rapid entry into the Gangetic transport system for people working the uplands north and south of the Ganga. Iron tools increased agricultural output everywhere, but made a much bigger difference in the east, where iron weapons also strengthened warriors. People with iron tools made the boats that travelled the highway of the Ganga, and the carts that plied the roads along the basin.

The first organized state institutions appear in the eastern Ganga basin, fed by major trading routes running along rivers from Bihar to Gujarat and the Hindu Kush. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* indicates that by the start of the Common Era, long-distance trade sustained widely known sites of commodity specialization from Central Asia and Sind to Assam. Horses came from Punjab; pearls from Sind; cotton and sandalwood from Malwa; elephants, stones, and minerals from the southern mountains; cotton and silk from Bengal; and sandalwood from Assam. Cotton, silk, and wool cloth came from many places along the Ganga. Iron and silver came from mines in Jharkhand.

A vast triangle of trade routes connecting Kabul, Gujarat, and Assam became perhaps the largest integrated economic space in the ancient world. By 300 BCE, production and trade in this region was generating enough profit, taxation, tribute, and consumption to sustain a burst of social invention, most visibly along the highway of the Ganga, especially in the east. The first big cities built after the fall of Harappa arose around Pataliputra (now Patna in Bihar). They had a distinctive urban culture, elites, and expressive arts. Social stratification became complex. Initially, social strata were based on elite control of agricultural land and farm labour by lineage elders in territories called *janapadas* and *maha* (great) *janapadas*. These small domains were named after their dominant clans and are described in the epics as well as in Panini's grammar, Buddhist texts, and other sources. Panini indicates that in 300 BCE the *janapadas* were the most prominent political features of the Indo-Gangetic flatlands from Punjab to Bengal. By this time, however, new ruling elite strata and institutions had also appeared where rulers rose above limitations of kinship, forming states. Some of these states are called 'republics' because of power sharing among the ruling lineages inside them; others are called 'kingdoms' because of the supremacy of single rulers. What distinguished the new state territories most of all was the rise of capital cities at strategic military and commercial sites, where elite groups of various kinds concentrated their social activity.

CONSTRUCTING EMPIRE

Chandragupta Maurya was born into this ancient world, near Pataliputra, where, in the sixth century BCE, local Magadha rulers had raised armies to conquer widely and create the first large state. From the obscure Moriya clan, Chandragupta may have owned some land around Magadha before he led Magadha armies to conquer the *janapadas* as far west as Punjab and Sind. In doing so, he crossed a cultural divide. Agro-pastoral warrior lineages living in the western dry regions had superior access to most of the length of ancient trade routes, and their various *janapadas* had embraced Aryan culture as far east as Prayagā (Allahabad). Magadha lay further east on the outer fringe of Aryan cultural influence, and it was here, in the east, that the Buddha composed an alternative ethical system, opposed to Aryan Brahmanism. Magadha armies from the east conquered local competitors and then moved west. Victorious commanders subordinated the *janapadas* under an imperial authority whose primary goal was to maintain its own military strength. This rudimentary imperial scaffolding provided the framework for Chandragupta's ambition.

In the far west, Magadha troops faced Achaemenid Greek armies marching across Persia. As Greek soldiers marched east and Magadha troops marched west, they both knew they were following old routes of long-distance travel, but they did not know that they were creating a new world of politics that would stretch from Greece to Bengal. Routes from Europe to the Orient and from Magadha to Persia met in Punjab: the Indus became the symbolic western border of a region that the Greeks called 'India'. The original division of Asia and Europe, East and West, Orient and Occident, derived from military competition over routes and resources flowing across ancient Eurasia. Ancient empires thus invented cultural boundaries that we still live with today; how these territorial identities came down to the present is a long story that we will follow in the coming chapters.

Chandragupta won wars for Magadha in Sind and may have fought Alexander the Great in Punjab before Alexander's army mutinied to force a Greek retreat down the Indus in 327 BCE. Alexander sailed to Mesopotamia and died in Babylon at the age of thirty-four. Chandragupta marched east, conquered his overlords, and became South Asia's first emperor. He launched his Maurya imperial dynasty by building on Magadha victories to incorporate the *janapadas* in a structure of military command

to nature, though later evidence indicates many cultural contributions from prehistoric forest dwellers.

In Punjab, a dry region with grasslands watered by five rivers (hence 'panch' and 'ab') draining the western Himalayas, one prehistoric culture left no material remains, but some of its ritual texts were preserved orally over the millennia. The culture is called Aryan, and evidence in its texts indicates that it spread slowly south-east, following the course of the Yamuna and Ganga Rivers. Its elite called itself *Arya* (pure) and distinguished themselves sharply from others. Aryans led kin groups organized as nomadic horse-herding tribes. Their ritual texts are called Vedas, composed in Sanskrit. Vedic Sanskrit is recorded only in hymns that were part of Vedic rituals to Aryan gods. To be Aryan apparently meant to belong to the elite among pastoral tribes. Texts that record Aryan culture are not precisely datable, but they seem to begin around 1200 BCE with four collections of Vedic hymns (*Rg, Sama, Yajur, and Artharva*).

Textual evidence indicates that the use of Sanskrit and Vedic rituals spread unevenly across the subsequent millennium. Six hundred years after the first Vedas, ritual texts called Brahmanas and mystical and philosophical Aranyakas and Upanishads describe activity farther and farther east in the Ganga basin. Two epic poems, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, refer to wars among tribes, probably in the first half of the first millennium BCE, in the western Ganga basin; but the epics were composed centuries after the wars they describe and they were added to and revised many times over the centuries that followed. The major ancient grammatical text of the Sanskrit language, Panini's *Astadhyayi* (with a geographical appendix, *Ganapatha*) is datable to the late fourth century BCE by references to contemporary events and personalities. By that time, the corpus of ancient Sanskrit texts had formed a coherent cultural complex, Vedic Brahmanism. In that textual culture, social rituals prescribed that rulers must protect and enforce stratified ranks among four *varnas*: Brahman (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaisya (merchant), and Sudra (worker). Ritual texts also describe the territory of Aryan culture, called Madhyama Dis or Madhya-Desh, 'the central country'. By about 500 BCE, Aryan cultural evidence had spread east from Gandhara (in the hills above Punjab, where Panini composed his grammar) and Kurukshetra (near Delhi, where the *Mahabharata* wars occurred) as far to the east as the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna at Pratisthana/Prayaga (Allahabad). Sanskrit geographical knowledge was much more extensive – Rama,

the hero of the *Ramayana*, travelled south across the peninsula and the sea to Lanka (Sri Lanka) to save his wife, Sita, from her captor, Ravana – but as Panini indicates in a detailed list of peoples and places, ancient Sanskrit authors were at home in Punjab, Haryana, and the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. Here, their culture was one among many, though we know much less about others.

ANCIENT TRANSFORMATION

Prehistory shades into history as ancient documentation becomes firmly datable. This begins to occur in the sixth century BCE, during the reign of the Magadha kings in the eastern Ganga basin, when Buddhist texts can be dated along with recorded activity by Achaemenid Greek rulers in Persia and Afghanistan.

During the first thousand years of recorded history in South Asia, an ancient transformation produced entirely new social environments. Prehistoric societies were many but small, and they had no visible institutions. In the sixth century BCE, history's curtain rises on a dramatic scene of political invention as powerful people begin to make powerful states. By 300 BCE, societies along the Ganga basin were part of vast networks of politics, economy, and culture. Settlements stretching from Afghanistan to Bengal were connected to one another by regular flows of ideas and goods running through cities that became central sites for imperial society. By 100 CE, competing imperial armies ranged from Central Asia to Sri Lanka. By 500 CE, complex regions of social change all across South Asia were connected intricately to one another and to the wider world.

The ancient transformation from *circa* 500 BCE to *circa* 500 CE produced a cultural complex that would be called 'classical' in later times. This epochal change is so complex and poorly documented that no single explanation will ever suffice. Clearly, however, iron-making technologies that appear in Vedic times played a productive role. Chopping and digging with iron tools gave new advantages to people who struggled against the forest: they could now burn down trees to make farms and keep new jungle growth away with arduous manual labour. In the Ganga basin, land clearance to make permanent farms spread from west to east and created a new landscape spanning wet and dry regions for the first time. Rice-growing societies in the eastern Ganga basin could sustain larger populations; they also had closer access to iron ores and other minerals in the mountains of Jharkhand. River routes into and out

Indus Valley cities declined, other smaller sites containing similar cultural material multiplied north and south, in Gujarat and Punjab. Recent findings suggest that Harappan cultural production may have continued into the first millennium BCE, alongside settlements that are distinguished by later archaeological finds of Painted Grey Ware pottery. The famous prehistoric cities along the Indus emerged within a very old, resilient cultural complex that covered a vast area of dry land and river valleys stretching from Afghanistan to Sind, Punjab, and the western Gangetic Plain. This cultural complex was both indigenous to South Asia and enriched by long-distance trade.

If we set out on a tour of South Asia in 2000 BCE, we would certainly begin by admiring its massive Indus Valley cities, with their advanced hydrology and architecture, which required great technical skill and organized construction work. Outside these few cities, however, we would find that most of the scant human population consisted of hunters, gatherers, herders, and farmers, living in small mobile settlements. Wild animals – including elephants, tigers, deer, and buffaloes – outnumbered humans many times over.

Dry, wet, mountain, and coastal climates supported distinctive human communities. In wet regions, dense tropical jungles were naturally well endowed with food supplies for humans, but also with wild animals (notably snakes and tigers) and micro-organisms (notably waterborne parasites) that killed humans. To create stable living environments in tropical settings, people had to clear jungles to create farms, arduous work that had to be done repeatedly because jungle growth is tenacious. Before the advent of iron tools, around 1200 BCE, jungles constantly defeated human efforts to create permanent farming settlements; shifting cultivation was the only agrarian option, and combined with hunting, gathering, and fishing, it provided for an ample human diet. Rice, originally a swamp grass, was first domesticated on temporary fields. Slash-and-burn farming remained the norm long after agrarian societies began to cut, burn, and build permanent fields and settlements to produce expansive landscapes of settled agriculture in the plains. This agrarian transformation of the wet lowlands began in the first millennium BCE.

In dry lands, migratory life typically moved over wider spaces. Where water failed to come to the land, people and animals moved to water. Animal herding and nomadism combined naturally with extensive hunting, warfare, and trade, which developed productive but conflict-ridden synergies with sedentary farming.

Nomads raised animals that farming communities used for manure and ploughing, for edible meat and milk, and for skins, fur, and wool. Nomads engaged in trade and transported craft products and implements among settled communities. Animal-herding pastoral peoples exchanged goods with farmers who provided them with staple grains (millets and wheat), fruits, vegetables, and manufactures, including metal tools and weapons. For grazing their animals, herders often needed water and grass that lay in localities controlled by farmers, whose crops benefited from animal manure. Farmers and herders were also hunters, and their hunting skills were often turned against human competitors seeking land and water. Nomads on horseback became the most powerful warriors, ranging over wide distances.

Agro-pastoral communities combining the skills and resources of herders, farmers, and craftworkers built the homelands that we see scattered in archaeological remains in dry regions from Baluchistan to Punjab and the Deccan. Social mixtures of hunting, gathering, herding, farming, manufacturing, and trade supported prehistoric communities that combined sedentary and migratory ways of life. Archaeological remains from Gujarat in the second millennium BCE indicate that pastoral circuits of animal grazing and nomadic migration ran through sedentary farming communities like thread through beads on a necklace.

Elements of sedentary cultures moved along circuits of migration and trade that connected and sustained an array of small, separate communities. Cultural assemblages thus emerged which were composed of various symbolic and material elements that we see in archaeological evidence. As elements dispersed geographically, they formed distinct cultural areas that changed shape and overlapped. The cultural complex that includes Mehrgarh and Harappa is now the oldest we know. Physical remains indicate that a different but perhaps related Banas culture characterized by white-painted black and red pottery developed in Rajasthan and Malwa in the millennium after 2500 BCE. At the same time, another Malwa culture was spreading south in central India, a Savalda complex formed in Maharashtra, and other areas of settlement marked by distinctive pottery and metal tools developed in the eastern Vindhya and southern Deccan. Other cultural areas of comparable antiquity are also visible in the southern peninsula which contained megalithic tombs, urns, cists, rock-cut caves, cairns, sarcophagi, and stone tombs that resemble hats called *topi kals*. Especially in the wetter regions, evidence of cultural activity in prehistory returned invisibly

Bangladesh and Burma south to Indonesia, where heavy rain, cloudy, humid days, dense tropical jungles, slash-and-burn farming, rice-paddy cultivation, fishing, and seafaring have historically been prominent features of everyday life. People living at high altitudes inhabit other environments altogether, which in the arid west shade off into Central Asia, in the north resemble Tibet more than India, and in the north-east resemble interior South-East Asia much more than Rajasthan or Gujarat. Places along the coast physically resemble coastal Indonesia more than arid inland or high-altitude South Asia.

Spaces defined by historical activity and by networks of interaction shaping everyday life in South Asia have never corresponded to the boundaries of modern states. South Asia has been formed as an open space for movement and communication. To and from its dry half, routes of migration, trade, and resettlement lead to and from Asia's dry west and north, into the arid home of the Silk Road, and running into Africa. Human cultivation of millet and wheat began somewhere along these routes; exactly where is unknown. Recent carbon dates for pollen found in dry lakes in Rajasthan indicate that a period of increasing moisture occurred in Asia's dry zone at the time of the earliest-known grain cultivation in the Middle East, around 7500 BCE; this means that archaeological finds at Mehrgarh and elsewhere may represent the roughly simultaneous origination of dry grain cultivation in South Asia and the Middle East. In the Himalayas, settlers, herders, and migrants move regularly across Tibet, and Tibetan Buddhism is as deeply entrenched in Nepal as Hinduism. Mountains are open terrain connecting Burma, Assam, and Bengal. The earliest evidence of rice cultivation in South Asia is roughly contemporary with evidence from South-East Asia. In the eighteenth century, migrants from Arakan did much of the most arduous new land clearance in southern Bengal. In Shillong, now in India's north-eastern state of Meghalaya, people speak Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, and Indo-European languages. All the coastal regions are also intimately interconnected: Sinhala and Bangla languages are closely related; southern India has sent many waves of migrants to Sri Lanka; and coast ports have long been their own best trading partners, including those in South-East Asia, where so-called 'Indianization' occurred during the first millennium CE, when merchants from Gujarat arrived routinely in Java. In 1800, fishing ships from many towns along India's east and west coasts brought workers and equipment for digging pearls from the ocean floor in the Gulf of Manaar off the coast of Sri Lanka.

From ancient times, cultural elements of all sorts have moved in all directions. We find Hindu temples and Sanskrit texts in Cambodia and Indonesia. Buddhism flourished more in East and South-East Asia than in its birthplace in northern India. Japanese Buddhists now tour holy sites in India the way Christians visit Jerusalem. Christians and Jews came by sea to settle on the Kerala coast in the early centuries CE. Islam spread across southern Asia by land among inland regions, and by sea among Indian Ocean ports, until the majority of the world's Muslims lived east of Iran. The definitive linguistic components of South Asian languages are spread all across Asia. Examples are endless of vast cultural mobility, mixing, and dispersion.

To understand South Asia, we should think of all of its civilizations as being historically invented as bounded cultural entities. There is no one set of boundaries to assume as definitive containers for history in South Asia. Political boundaries have changed many times. It is most appropriate to study South Asia as a vast open geographical space spreading across southern Eurasia, rather than imagining it to be a world region with one territorial definition.

PREHISTORIC SOCIETIES

Humans have lived in South Asia for half a million years. Relics indicate that the earliest human settlers lived in virtually every ecological niche. They would all have migrated from somewhere else at some point in time, but certain places have been continuously occupied since the eighth millennium BCE, when agro-pastoral settlements were established. Mehrgarh, in central Baluchistan, is now the oldest site where archaeology can show that microlithic tool-using people produced a complex farming society; it is in the dry, mountainous land between the Indus Valley and Afghanistan, where physical remains survive much better than they do in wet lands. From the seventh to the fourth millennium BCE, Mehrgarh underwent indigenous technological development connected to migratory trade with western and central Asia.

Similar sites dating to about 3000 BCE also indicate a cultural complex which has been named after the later Indus Valley site at Harappa; it includes large, solid buildings, pottery, wool and cotton textiles, copperware, seals, and female figurines. Along the Indus Valley, large cities were built by about 2500 BCE at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa; but five hundred years later, they were being depopulated; and a few centuries later, they were abandoned. As the

as Sri Lanka. Over millennia, flowing silt routinely changed the course of Indo-Gangetic rivers. In deltaic Bengal, the Ganga shifted steadily eastward, and by the eighteenth century the Ganga and Brahmaputra had merged in what is now Bangladesh. Silt constantly forms new islands, called *char*, in the rivers of Bangladesh, as rivers wash land on river banks out to sea.

South Asia's natural environment occupies the south-western edge of monsoon Asia. Embracing the Himalayas and Sri Lanka, it stretches from Afghanistan to Burma between five and forty degrees north latitude. It is hot at midday all year, but temperatures do vary between winter and summer. In the northern plains, winters are quite cold and peak summer heat is brutal. Yet seasons are marked more by rainfall than by temperature. When Central Asia heats up each spring, rising hot dry air draws in wet cooler air from the oceans and generates barometric disparities that spark storms of varying scope and ferocity from Baluchistan to Korea: these rain-storms and their winds are called monsoons.

Rain is always the big weather news in South Asia, and there is little to report from January to June. The dry, unrelenting heat peaks in May. Then the monsoon hits. Its starting date varies, but normally its happy arrival falls at the beginning of June. First, the monsoon rains soak the coast and the east, South Asia's wet half, where rainfall normally exceeds eighty centimetres per year. In Assam, Bangladesh, and the north-east mountains, as much as three metres of monsoon rain can fall in six months. In these wet regions, cyclones and floods normally bring the worst weather news. On the east coast, from Chennai to Chittagong, killer cyclones strike every few years. A 'super-cyclone' hit Odisha in 1999, washing away villages hundreds of miles inland. In Bengal, storms from the sea often combine with flooding. In the eastern Ganga basin and all along the Brahmaputra, severe flooding is a constant threat. In Bangladesh, much of the land floods annually; in the live delta, there is more water than land, and fish are as essential to the diet as the waterways are to transport. The meaning of flooding has changed dramatically over the centuries. In the eighteenth century, seagoing ships were built in the mountains above the Bengal plains and floated out to sea across a hundred miles of flooded forest; but now that same land is full of farms, villages, towns, and cities, including Dhaka, and flooding causes mass death and destruction. People living in the wet coastal regions and islands of South and South-East Asia are today the most vulnerable in the world to rising sea levels, increased flooding, and storm surges caused by global climate change.

The monsoon arrives later in the western, dry half of South Asia, which includes the interior peninsula. Rains start as late as the end of July in Baluchistan and Multan. In dry South Asia the bad-weather news is normally drought, but devastating flash floods do occur when swollen rivers wash suddenly over hard parched land, as they did in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, in 2000, and in the Indus Valley in 2010. The monsoon is very often late and stingy in dry South Asia. All of the interior peninsula and western plains – running north from Gujarat to the Khyber Pass and east from Sind to Malwa and Delhi – remain parched and dusty most of the year. Most rivers are bone dry in the summer. Rainfall rarely measures more than eighty centimetres annually, often less than twenty, and in the Thar Desert, in Rajasthan, less than ten. Desert winds from Rajasthan blow dust storms across Delhi in the late summer.

The very long-term climatic trend seems to be towards increasing aridity. The drying up of the Saraswati River, which once flowed into Rajasthan across eastern Punjab, was a major ecological event in prehistory. Prehistoric Indus Valley cities probably declined in part because they could not get enough water; as did Fatehpur Sikri, the first Mughal fortress capital, built too far west, too far into the desert, in the sixteenth century. Deforestation has been broadly blamed for increasing aridity as well as flooding in South Asia, and current trends in global climate change seem to be amplifying climate extremes, making desertification seem as unstoppable in the long term in dry regions as submersion by the sea seems to be for the coastal plains and islands.

OPEN GEOGRAPHY

Human living environments span a wider range of climatic variation in South Asia than anywhere else in the world at these latitudes. Environments to the west (in the Middle East and Africa) are uniformly dry; and to the east (in South-East Asia and China), uniformly wet. South Asia has both extremes. South Asia's dry half is climatically part of a vast geographical zone that covers western Asia and northern Africa: the natural ground cover is thin scrub forest; nomadic tribes and pastoral economies are historically prominent; millet and wheat are ancient staple grains; irrigation is the key to agrarian wealth; and old oasis towns dot sandy expanses of thinly populated land like port cities. South Asia's wet half is instead climatically part of a humid climatic zone running along the eastern Indian Ocean rim, from Bombay to Sri Lanka and through

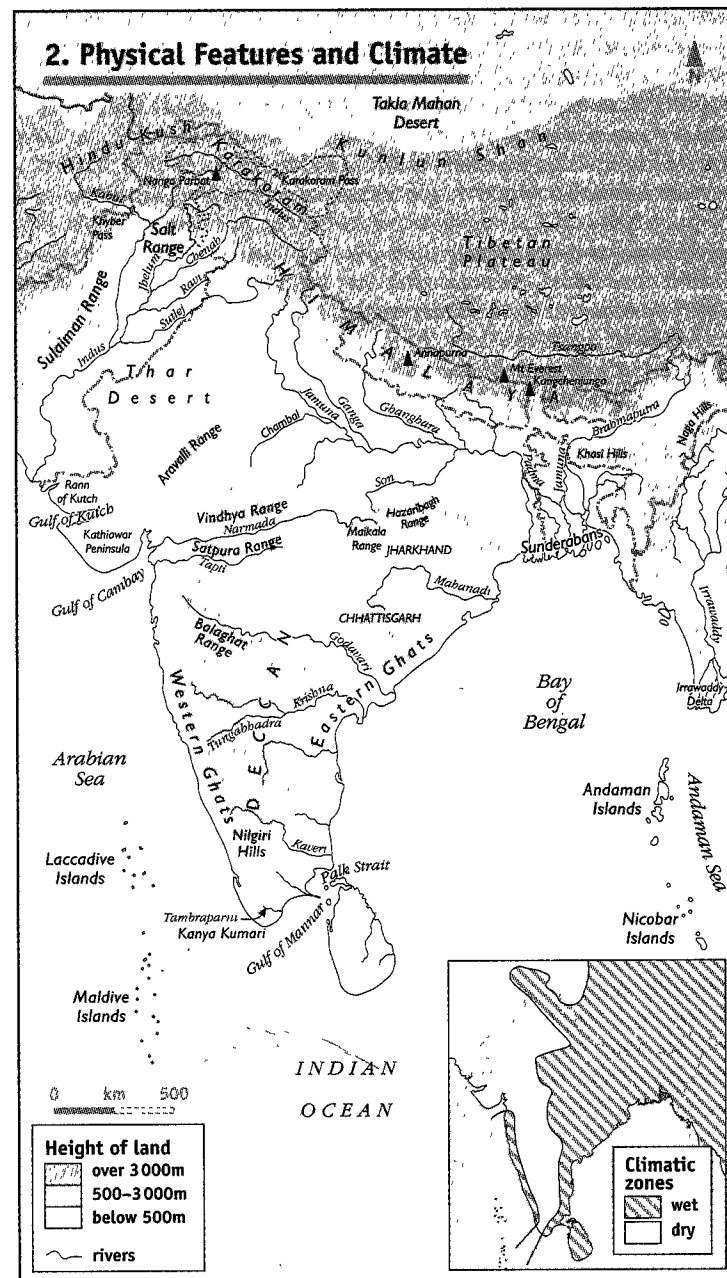
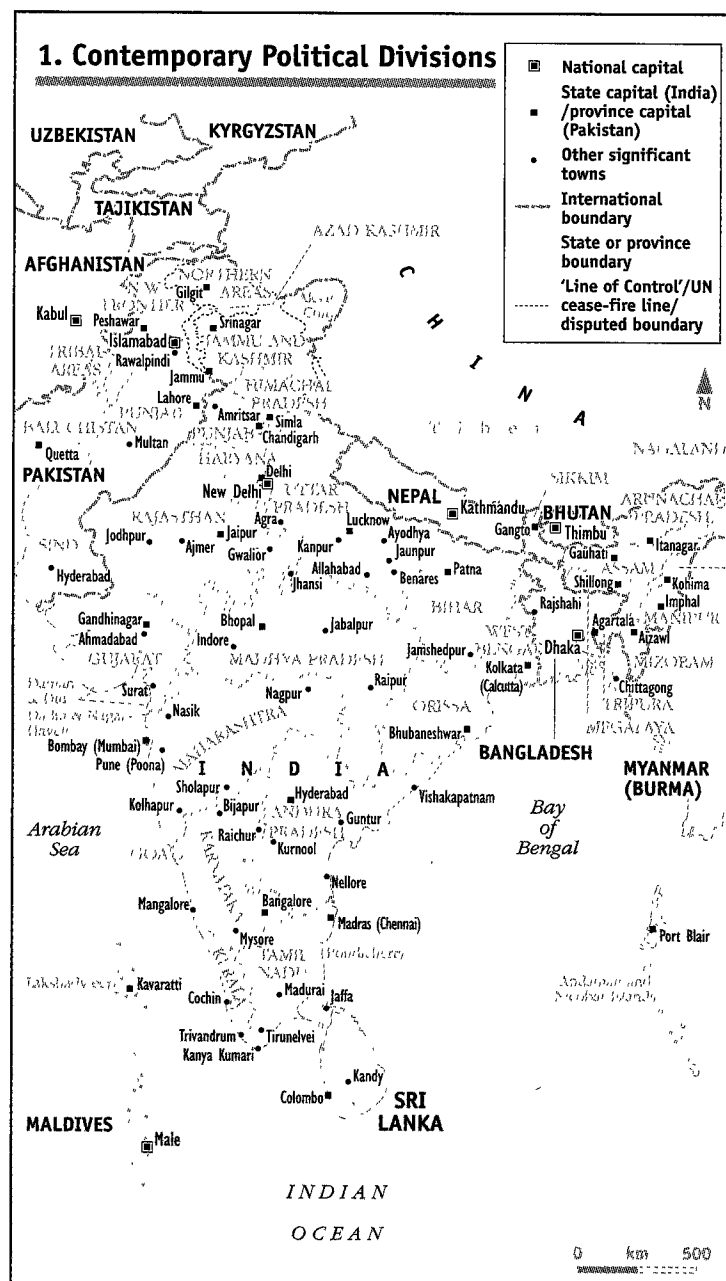


TABLE 1. A CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANTIQUITY

I. Prehistory BCE

To 2500	Stone age, microlithic tool cultures, Mehrgarh.
2500–1500	Harappa and Indus Valley urban culture.

II. Earliest history to 600 BCE

1200–400s	Early Vedas, late Vedas and Brahmanas.
1000s	Iron smelting and tools.
900s	Period of wars recounted in <i>Mahabharata</i> .
700s	Formation of <i>janapadas</i> and sixteen <i>mahajanapadas</i> .

*III. Ancient transformation**a. The original states, circa 600 to 327 BCE*

600s–500s	Rise of states: Kuru, Panchala, Kosala, Magadha.
500s	Persian king Darius occupies Sind and Gandhara; life of Mahavira.
400s	Life of Buddha; composition of <i>Ramayana</i> and <i>Mahabharata</i> .
327	Alexander the Great enters Punjab.

b. The original empire, 300s–185 BCE

Late 300s	Chandragupta Maurya founds Mauryan Empire; composition of Panini's grammar, possible first version of <i>Arthashastra</i> .
268–233	Ashoka Maurya.
185	Last Mauryas; founding of Sunga dynasty in Pataliputra.

c. Imperial competition 250 BCE–250 CE

250 BCE–250	North-west: Indo-Greeks, northern Sakas, Indo-Parthians, Kushanas.
55 BCE–500s	South: Satavahana and Vakataka dynasties in Prastisthana and Vidarbha.
70–409 CE	West: Sakas in Malwa Ujjaini-Rajasthan-Gujarat.

TABLE 1. *CONTINUED**c. Imperial competition 250 BCE–250 CE (continued)*

100 BCE–100	Early Siva and Vishnu worship; Buddhist stupas prominent in north-west, south-east, Sri Lanka; early Sangam literature; composition of Manu's <i>dharmasastra</i> , <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> .
-------------	--

d. Dynastic territories circa 200 BCE–600 CE

320–840s	Ganga basin: Guptas and Pusyaputis.
400s–500s	North-west: southern Hunas.
100 BCE–400	Southern peninsula: Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas.
200s–500s	Maharashtra: Vakatakas, Kalacuris, and Rashtrakutas.
500s–750s	Karnataka: Chalukyas.
200s BCE–1200s	Sri Lanka: Lambakannas.

South Asia were thinly populated. Small human communities were widely scattered. Much more land was covered by forests filled with wild animals than by farms, villages, towns, and cities. Entering this landscape provides a much-needed critical perspective on the radical novelty of modernity.

LAND AND WATER

Aeons ago in the geological past, a triangle of rocky land broke off from East Africa, drifted north in the Indian Ocean, and crashed into Eurasia. The upheaval produced the Himalayas; its violence still visits the pivotal point of the geological merger, when earthquakes rock regions from Gujarat across the Himalayas to Bangladesh. Merging tectonic plates produced volcanoes that spewed ash across the new peninsula. Monsoon rains washed this fertile black volcanic soil into wide seams along peninsular rivers. Rain and melting ice and snow scoured Himalayan slopes to make the great rivers Indus, Ganga, and Brahmaputra. These rivers washed Himalayan silt across the plains, and even now dump it continuously into the Bengal delta. Silt visible in satellite photos is still washing along the floor of the Indian Ocean as far south

appeared to maintain their integrity, responding and adapting to the challenges of history right down to the present day.

In this traditional formulation, we hear echoes of modern nationalism resounding in the idea that indigenous resistance to foreign invasion spurred the early formation of the ancient empires. It is indeed true that in the wake of victories by Darius, king of Persia, who conquered Sind and Gandhara in the sixth century BCE, and after several early efforts at empire building by rulers along the banks of the Ganga, the Maurya Empire rose at the same time as Alexander the Great entered Punjab from Persia in 327 BCE. But now we can see that modern national identities had projected themselves into the distant past by imagining that Mauryan armies were defending their homeland against foreign invaders from Greece and Persia. This same idea of defensive response was also used to explain the later rise of the Guptas, who finally managed to unify the Ganga basin once again after centuries of conquest by Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Indo-Parthians, and Kushanas, travelling across West and Central Asia and marching down the Hindu Kush into the Indus Valley lowlands. The same idea was used again to show how invading Hunas from Central Asia broke up the Gupta Empire, in the fifth century, when political fragmentation inside India was seen to have prevented imperial unity against the invaders. The same fractious disunity inside India continued to prevent solidarity against many later invaders. In the eighth century, Arabs came by sea to conquer Sind. From the twelfth century onward, invading conquerors included Afghans, Turks, Mongols, Persians, and, finally, Europeans. From 1290 until 1947, Muslims and Christians ruled most of the land of Indic civilization. The British were the last foreign rulers, from 1757 to 1947. Thus it fell to modern nationalism to unify native peoples against foreign threats once and for all.

This grand narrative of history in South Asia – based on the idea of an original, indigenous culture facing foreign invasions – provided the first framework for modern historical studies. It informed national cultures and national identities. It perpetuated the idea that Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians each represent distinct civilizations with their own ancient, native territories. Thus it helped to bolster the identification of independent national states, each with their separate domain of world history.

New discoveries and new perspectives now provide many different avenues for exploring South Asia's ancient, medieval, and modern history. We now see that rather than having had one singular origin, South Asia has always included diverse peoples and

cultures with different points of departure and distinctive historical trajectories. What once seemed like a single tree of Indic culture rooted in the Vedas, with many branches spreading out over the centuries, has come to look more like a vast forest of many cultures filled with countless trees of various sizes, ages, and types, constantly crossbreeding to fertilize one another. The profusion of cultures also blurs the boundaries of the forest. Cultural boundaries drawn by modern scholars in and around South Asia have come to be seen more as artifacts of modern national cultures than as an accurate reflection of pre-modern conditions. Prehistoric urban sites in the Indus river valley, much older than the Vedas, and many smaller offshoots scattered from Punjab to Gujarat, participated in a vast prehistory of urbanism that spread across southern Eurasia; and they also participated in the indigenous evolution of agropastoral societies in South Asia. Pre-Vedic cultures should not be assigned exclusively to the prehistory of modern South Asia, West Asia, India, or Pakistan: they participate in all of these at the same time. The singers of the Vedas informed cultures in ancient South Asia, and also moved among prehistoric pastoral cultures crisscrossing Central and West Asia. The mingling and fusion of cultures have always occurred in vast open Asian spaces cut up into modern territories by boundaries that divide today's national states.

With all this in view, it becomes obvious that we must now separate the academic study of pre-modern history from the construction of modern identities. We need to separate the study of the distant past from cultural politics in the world of nations. As we will see, pre-modern history does indeed help us to understand the present, but not by its immanent foreshadowing of current conditions, or by its revelation of classical truths to guide modern life; rather by its indication that distinctly modern modes of social existence came into being in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, setting them apart from medieval and ancient histories. Using ancient and medieval evidence to validate modern boundaries, identities, and cultures obscures more than it reveals about pre-modern and modern histories alike. Pre-modern South Asia took shape inside spaces of mobility spanning all regions of southern Eurasia. These great open spaces composed South Asia's social world in a fluid, mobile manner, quite unlike today's restrictive national territorialism. The first basic lesson of this book is that travelling back into the distant past reveals cultures, identities, and environments which are as different from ours as their physical surroundings. Landscapes inhabited by pre-modern peoples in

by nationality, ethnicity, caste, religion, and class are very modern constructs, however essential and eternal they may feel. Their political mobilization may evoke ancient traditions, but the politics attached to religions and ethnic identities today are products of the present. Taking a long view of history, we can see that social identities feel most like permanent, essential, natural facts of life when they are embedded in systems of power that organize social experience by saturating everyday life with expressions of group membership and institutional authority. Nations appear to house separate cultures and histories only because social identities have been constructed inside powerful modern state institutions. As we will see, the expansive power of the market economy in the world of nations has tended to aggravate the separation of social identities. Geographical boundaries that define South Asia politically have changed massively over the centuries, but because boundaries are not changing today, national identities appear to be permanent and immutable in present-day perspectives. Historicizing the present reveals that social spaces where identities acquire their form and substance are indeed changing dramatically today, along with the institutions that hold them in place. The study of connections between local, regional, national, and global histories over many centuries provides a useful way to think creatively about social life and the future unfolding in the world around us today.

ONE

Inventing Civilization

South Asian history has no one beginning, no one chronology, no single plot or narrative. It is not a singular history, but rather many histories, with indefinite, contested origins and with countless separate trajectories that multiply as we learn more about the past. In recent decades, history's multiplicity, antiquity, and ambiguity have become more complicated as scholars have opened up new perspectives on the past and made new discoveries.

As recently as the 1960s, it seemed to most scholars that South Asian history began at a singular moment in the second millennium BCE, when the oldest-known texts, the Vedas, were composed. A clear, continuous stream of cultural tradition once seemed to flow from Vedic to modern times, allowing modern scholars to dip into ancient texts to savour the original essence of a culture they could still see around them. Culture seemed to grow into a fully developed classical civilization under the ancient empires of the Mauryas (321–181 BCE) and the Guptas (320–520 CE), on the banks of the sacred river Ganga. Classical societies appeared to follow Vedic norms, and to embody sacred traditions recorded in later Sanskrit texts, which prescribe the division of Hindu society into ritual strata, called *varna*, containing ranked social groups called *jati*. Classical tradition seemed to provide a blueprint for caste society down to modern times. After the Gupta Empire collapsed, apparently under the impact of foreign invasions, political fragmentation was seen to have characterized medieval times; but despite a long series of foreign conquests, the clear stream of Hindu tradition seemed to flow on continuously. After the end of the ancient empires, history brought turmoil and social and economic change, but ancient traditions