

HINDUISM

Key points:

- During the Maurya and Gupta empires, the Indian culture and way of life were deeply influenced by Hinduism.
- Hinduism reinforced a strict social hierarchy called a **caste system** that made it nearly impossible for people to move outside of their social station.
- Emperors during the Gupta empire used Hinduism as a unifying religion and focused on Hinduism as a means for personal salvation.

Followers of Hinduism may worship multiple different gods, although it's not a polytheistic religion because all these gods are believed to be manifestations of the one Brahman.

One notable difference between Hinduism and other major religions is that it doesn't have a clear founder or starting point; rather, it grew and spread—possibly as early as 5500 BCE—in the Indian subcontinent and changed over time based on Indian culture and economics.

Background on social systems in India

In the Indian empires from 600 BCE to 600 CE, emperors maintained and further developed social systems that had been in place for a long time. The **Aryans**, nomadic herders from Central Asia who had migrated into the Indian subcontinent by 1500 BCE, had already established a caste system with four main groups of people: Brahmins, or priests; Kshatriyas, or warriors and aristocrats; Vaishyas, or peasants and merchants; and Shudras, or serfs.

This separation of people by class and job gained an even bigger foothold within Hinduism: according to Hindu myth, the god Purusha was assembled from the four castes, with the Brahmins at the head and the Shudras at the feet. It was believed that Shudras had been born into their caste because they committed bad deeds in a previous life. The Hindu ideal of **karma** suggested that people who behaved well could be born into a higher caste.

Popularization of Hinduism

Hinduism originally started as a tradition from within the brahmin class, making it difficult for people of lower castes to access, but it gradually grew more popular. Sometime around 1500 to 500 BCE, two epic poems called the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were created and eventually written down in the early centuries of the Common Era. These poems laid out information about Hindu values and gods—Vishnu, for example—through dramatic stories of love and war. When these stories were written down, they spread more quickly and easily throughout India. Another text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, was a poem that highlighted Hindu values and the possibility of salvation for people who lived those values. The *Bhagavad Gita* helped popularize Hinduism among lower castes because it asserted that people could achieve salvation by performing their caste duties.

During the Gupta empire—from about 320 to 550 CE—emperors used Hinduism as a unifying religion and helped popularize it by promoting educational systems that included Hindu teachings; they also gave land to Brahmins. The Gupta emperors helped make Hinduism the most popular religion on the Indian subcontinent.

BUDDHISM

Key points:

- During the Maurya empire, the Indian culture and way of life were deeply influenced by Buddhism.
- Buddhism appealed to people of lower castes because it emphasized individuals' path to enlightenment and salvation, which could be attained in this life.
- Buddhism also received state support from Emperor Ashoka, who converted to Buddhism in 260 BCE.

The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, was born circa 563 BCE into a wealthy family. Gautama rejected his life of riches and embraced a lifestyle of **asceticism**, or extreme self-discipline. After 49 consecutive days of meditation, Gautama became the Buddha, or "enlightened one". He made this announcement in public at about 528 BCE and gained a group of disciples who became Buddhist monks and traveled throughout northern India spreading his teachings.

Buddhism has a strong individualistic component: everyone has responsibility for their own happiness in life. Buddha presented the **Four Noble Truths** as guiding principles: there is suffering in life; the cause of suffering is desire; ending desire means ending suffering; and following a controlled and moderate lifestyle will end desire, and therefore end suffering.

In order to achieve these goals, the Buddha presented the **Noble Eightfold Path**: right belief, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right occupation, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi—or meditation. According to Buddhist practice, following the Noble Eightfold Path will ultimately result in being liberated from **samsara**, the cycle of rebirth and suffering.

Many followers of this path to enlightenment participated in an emerging Buddhist monastic tradition. **Monasticism** is a religious way of life which involves leaving behind worldly pursuits and devoting oneself to spiritual activity.

Buddhism's individual outlook and disregard for the caste system in attaining enlightenment were appealing to people in lower castes. Buddhism suggested that individual people might be able to attain enlightenment in this life and held that caste was not a punishment for deeds committed in a past life. Women also had some opportunities within Buddhism that they wouldn't have had access to otherwise, such as the ability to become Buddhist monks. Buddhism gave them an option for work outside the traditional sphere of family and home.

As you can imagine, following the Noble Eightfold Path was not an easy task! Buddhism was less popular with people in the vaishya—merchant—or shudra—servant—classes who could not devote all of their time and mental energy to pursuing these challenging goals. Partly in response, Mahayana Buddhism arose. **Mahayana Buddhism** is a form of Buddhism in which people could still attain enlightenment by performing acts of devotion or performing the duties of their jobs. This alternative approach made Buddhism more acceptable for a greater number of people. Mahayana means the greater vehicle and refers to the opportunity for more people to gain salvation.

Buddhism also received support from the state. In 260 BCE, King Ashoka adopted Buddhism after a violent war against the feudal state of Kalinga. He wanted to renounce violence and publicly turned to Buddhism in order to achieve this. He may have also turned to Buddhism as a way of uniting people of many castes and cultures under a similar religion, which might have made his empire easier to govern.

Processing questions:

Make a double bubble map or Venn Diagram below, showing the similarities and differences between Hinduism and Buddhism. You need at least four bullet points/comments in each section.

Hinduism:

1. How was Hinduism useful as a social structure in India?
2. How can you move up the caste system? Down the caste system?
3. Why might emperors want to establish a popular religion? What's the purpose of a leader announcing and embracing a specific religion?

Buddhism:

1. How did Buddhism spread from Siddhartha Gautama's teachings to a broader audience?
2. Why would Buddhism be difficult for people of lower castes to practice?
3. Why were the teachings of Buddhism an appealing alternative to Hinduism for people in lower castes?

Read the following excerpt, and then answer the questions that follow.

In the beginning, Ashoka ruled the empire like his grandfather did, in an efficient but cruel way. He used military strength in order to expand the empire and created sadistic rules against criminals. During the expansion of the Mauryan Empire, Ashoka led a war against a feudal state named Kalinga The disaster in Kalinga was supreme: with around 300,000 casualties, the city devastated and thousands of surviving men, women and children deported. What happened after this war has been subject to numerous stories and it is not easy to make a sharp distinction between facts and fiction. What is actually supported by historical evidence is that Ashoka issued an edict expressing his regret for the suffering inflicted in Kalinga and assuring that he would renounce war and embrace the propagation of dharma. What Ashoka meant by dharma is not entirely clear: some believe that he was referring to the teachings of the Buddha and, therefore, he was expressing his conversion to Buddhism."

From "Ashoka," Ancient History Encyclopedia, September 2013.

1. Why did Ashoka convert to Buddhism? What about Buddhist teachings suggests that he would desire that belief system over Hinduism?
2. How was Ashoka responsible for the spread of Buddhism throughout the Maurya Empire?