

History
UNFOLDING

INDIA

THE MAURYAS TO THE MUGHAL EMPIRE



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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India: The Mauryas to the Mughal Empire

Introduction

India's Classical Age

This MindSparks set is the second of two covering the story of India from ancient times through the Mughal Empire that lasted until just before the age of British imperial control. The first set is titled Ancient India (HS839).

More than 2000 years ago, Indian civilization already meant, above all else, Hinduism and the beliefs associated with it. For that reason, much of the material in this set focuses on Hinduism's role in Indian society, and on the other religions that in a sense were responses to it—Buddhism in particular. Political unity has been rare in India's history. Whereas, for example, China experienced long periods of unity under a single dynasty, punctuated by shorter periods of chaos and internal warfare, the reverse was the case for India. It is its religious traditions that have defined India's core cultural identity far more than any set of political institutions. That is why this set devotes so much space to those traditions, as well as to their interactions with Islam from the 11th century on.

This set uses 12 visual displays to focus on several of the key themes in India's story since the time of the Mauryan Empire. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Hindu India and the Buddha

A brief summary of key aspects of Hindu belief, their relationship to the caste system, and to the origins of Buddhism, which was at least in part a reaction against some aspects of Hinduism.

Unity and Disunity in Early India

The focus of these illustrations is on the rise and rapid fall of two northern empires in India, the Maurya and Gupta empires, with a focus also on Ashoka and his significance.

Buddhism and the Hindu Revival

A closer look at the specifics of Buddhist beliefs and at the revival of new, more devotional forms of Hinduism in the first millennium CE.

Islam and the Mughals

The arrival of Islam and various Muslim conquerors starting in the 11th century CE changed India in fundamental ways. The visual displays for this lesson focus on some of the issues this change raised for many of India's people.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*India: The Mauryas to the Mughal Empire***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better understand Hinduism and its role in Indian life.
2. Students will better understand how dissatisfaction among some Hindus may have contributed to the rise of Buddhism.

Hindu India and the Buddha

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

More than 2000 years ago, Indian civilization already meant, above all else, Hinduism and the beliefs associated with it. Hinduism was based on a powerful priesthood, the Brahmins. The photo here is of a modern-day Brahmin priest. Brahmins stood at the top of India's rigid caste system, in which people were limited by birth to a fixed social status. What made the caste system bearable to many was the Hindu concept of samsara, the idea that every person's undying soul passes from life to life. One's deeds, or karma, in this life directly affect one's future life. By this logic, one could enter a higher caste in the next life if one lived a virtuous life in the present.

Illustration 2

The caste system divided India in one way. Another clear division was that between men and women. In this, India was not different from many other traditional societies, such as those in China, Christian Europe, or later the Islamic lands of the Middle East. In those societies, women were subordinate to men in many ways. But this 19th-century watercolor depicts one Indian practice unique to India. The practice is suttee, in which a widow throws herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. The practice horrifies many, but some Hindus see it as an act of sacred devotion to the husband, a devotion that would continue into the afterlife.

Illustration 3

Dissatisfaction with the caste system and the Hindu priesthood may have aided the rise of Buddhism. The Buddha was Siddhartha Gautama, born a prince in the sixth century BCE. The gods supposedly came to him in a dream as he slept under a rose-apple tree. They showed him four sights his wealthy father had kept from him—a frail old man, a sick person, a dead person, and a monk seeking enlightenment. From this, Siddhartha concluded that only through spiritual enlightenment could humans escape suffering. Buddhism was to show the way to that enlightenment. Siddhartha accepted Hindu views about reincarnation, but he did not accept that caste limited one's ability to achieve that enlightenment. That is, one did not have to rise caste by caste through many lifetimes before attaining this spiritual release. This stone sculpture from the third century BCE shows Gautama Buddha with his devotees.

Lesson 1—Hindu India and the Buddha

Illustration 1

Hindu principles:

Dharma

The duty, code of conduct, or discipline guiding each individual's life

Karma

The actions one takes in life to fulfill or thwart one's *dharmā*

Samsara

The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth

The caste system:

Brahmin (priests)

Kshatriya (warriors, kings, princes)

Vaishya (merchants, farmers, artisans)

Shudra (servants, laborers)

Harijan (outcasts, "untouchables")



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Discussing the Illustrations

1. Riding with his attendants in this illustration is a priest of India's main religion. From the picture and the words shown here, what religion is that? What does this photo from the early 1900s suggest to you about Hinduism and the role of its priests in that religion?
2. As these words show, Brahmins are at the top of India's caste system. From the words and your general knowledge of India, can you explain what is meant by the "caste" system? Do you think this illustration in any way helps to clarify what the caste system is actually like? Why or why not?
3. The caste system seems unfair to many because it has usually been very difficult for a person born into one caste to move upward into another. But the three key Hindu principles shown here, especially *karma* and *samsara*, did make it easier for those in the lower castes to accept this fact. From what you know of the Hindu principles listed on top here, can you explain how they might have made the caste system more bearable to those in the lower castes?

Follow-up Activities

1. In the 1930s, Indian nationalist Mohandas Gandhi became a leader in the movement against the caste system. He fought hard to improve the status of those in the lower caste, the "untouchables." He actually began calling these people *Harijan*, or "children of God," the name commonly used today. How much did Gandhi succeed in reforming the caste system? Learn more about the caste system in India since Gandhi. To what extent does it survive? How has it been modified? Write a brief essay in which you present your findings.
2. The importance of the Brahmin priests grew out of the Vedic Age. As ritual sacrifice became more and more complex, the Brahmins became indispensable. Learn more about the role of the Brahmin priests in early Hinduism. Then learn more about the role of Roman Catholic priests in Europe's Middle Ages. Compare their role with that of the Brahmin priests. In what ways were they similar? In what ways were they different? Write a brief essay on what you find out.