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CHAPTER ONE

The Beginnings



Unlike such religions as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, Hinduism does not have a recognized “founder.” There is no Abraham, Jesus, Muhammad, or Buddha in Hindu history. Instead, Hinduism evolved over many hundreds of years. When it finally materialized, it was a mixture of the religious beliefs of India’s earliest civilization with those of northern invaders who entered the country about 1700 B.C.

Civilization in the Indus Valley

You have perhaps read that humans first established civilized communities about 6,000 years ago. Do you know what it means to become “civilized”? Simply put, it means that people stopped being hunters and gatherers after they “discovered” agriculture and learned to domesticate animals. When people learned to grow their own food, they could then settle down and stay in one place. This in turn led to the development of communal life, along with its accompanying laws, government, and culture.

One of the earliest civilizations sprang up in India. Sometime around 4000 B.C., dark-skinned peoples known as the *Dravidians* and the *Nagas* established a well-developed culture in the Indus River Valley. Archaeologists have unearthed two of their magnificent cities—*Mohenjo-Daro* and *Harappa*. Both could boast of solid brick houses and shops several stories high that sat on wide, well-kept streets. Many of these houses and shops had running water with bathrooms that emptied into modern-like sewage systems. The same water system also served a Great Bath

that featured a large, asphalt-lined bathing pool. The civilization that grew up in the Indus Valley may have been superior to the civilizations that appeared about the same time in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

So, you might ask, what does all of this have to do with the development of Hinduism? Plenty. *Artifacts* (objects people have left behind) found at the ruins of both Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa include clay statues of gods and goddesses that Hindus worship today. These finds indicate that Hinduism had its roots in the civilization that sprang up in the Indus River Valley more than 6,000 years ago.

Section Review:

1. What distinguishes a civilized society from one that is uncivilized?
2. Around which river valley did civilization develop in India?
3. What two ancient Indian cities have been unearthed by archaeologists?
4. What archaeological finds link the Hindu religion to early Indian civilization?

Enter the Aryans

No one knows for certain what happened to the great Indian cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Some historians think they may have been destroyed by either floods or volcanoes. But there was another disaster that occurred sometime around 1700 B.C. (dates vary) that seemed to have much to do with their destruction. That was the invasion from the north of a light-skinned people who called themselves *Aryans*. The name derives from a word in the language of the invaders (*Sanskrit*)

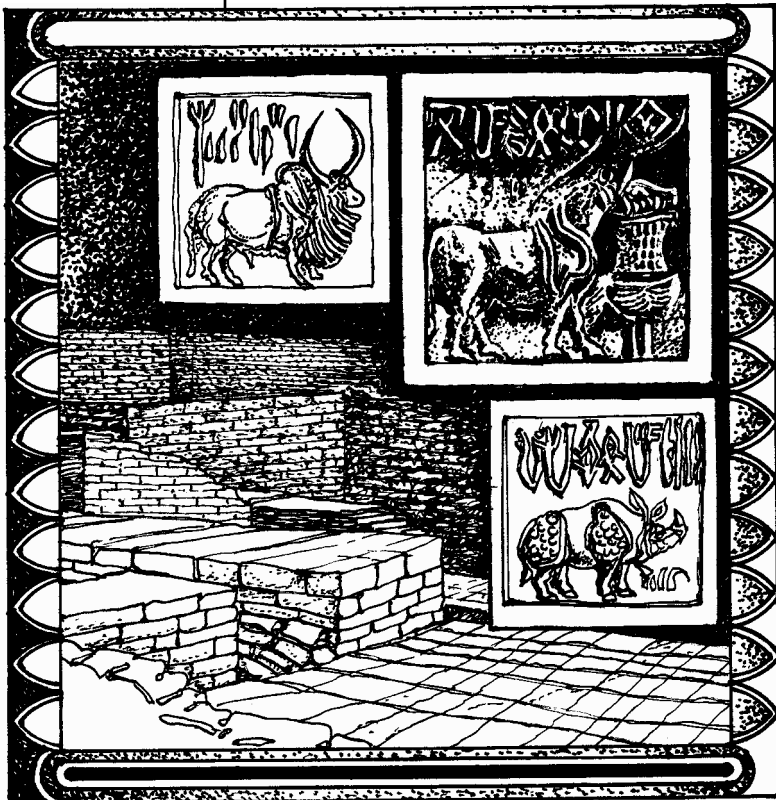
Words to remember:

Dravidians
Nagas
Mohenjo-Daro
Harappa
artifacts



which meant “noblemen” or “owners of land.”

The Aryans had little difficulty subduing the peoples of the Indus



Hinduism can be traced to the ancient peoples of the Indus River Valley in what is now Pakistan. The seals depicted above were unearthed from the ruins of the once great Indus city of Mohenjo-Daro.

Words to remember:

- Aryans
- Sanskrit
- polytheistic
- Indra
- Agni
- Varuna
- Vedas
- Rig-Veda

Valley. Their soldiers were armed with bows and arrows, and they marched behind charioteers wielding battle-axes and spears. Despite their military superiority, they came more as immigrants than as conquerors. Their desire was for land, not empire. Their word for war, in fact, had nothing to do with honor and conquest. It simply meant “a desire for more cows.”

Like all ancient peoples, the Aryans were *polytheistic*. This means they worshiped many gods. Their most important god was *Indra*, who was Lord of the Sky. Indra was also the giver of rain and the god of war. Two other important gods were *Agni*, the Lord of Fire, and *Varuna*, the Lord of the Waters. These gods are mentioned because they and others were slowly incorporated into what came to be the Hindu religion.

Much of what we know about the Aryans comes from their sacred texts, the

Vedas. The word *veda* means “knowledge.” The Vedas are the oldest of the texts that make up Hindu scriptures today. They consist of four collections of hymns, prayers, and magic spells. The *Rig-Veda* is the oldest and contains more than 1,000 hymns. The hymns are really poems praising the many gods the Aryans worshiped. You will learn more about the Vedas and other Hindu scriptures in Chapter Six, “Sacred Writings.”

Because of the Vedas, the period of Aryan influence in India is known as the “Vedic period,” and their religion is referred to as the “Vedic religion.”

Section Review:

1. List several theories as to what happened to the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa.
2. What did the name *Aryans* refer to?
3. Why do you think Indra was looked upon as the main Aryan god?
4. From what source does most of our knowledge of the Aryans come?

The Caste System

One thing soon became apparent to the Aryans when they conquered the peoples of the Indus Valley—they were vastly outnumbered by their subjects. They began to worry that with intermarriage between themselves and the Dravidians and Nagas, they would lose their identity as a separate people. So they set up a system that forbade marriage outside their own class. This was the beginning of what later came to be the *caste system*. (A *caste* is a class into which a person is born and must remain his or her entire life.)

The conquering Aryans had always been loosely divided into classes. At the top were the nobles, followed by the priests and then the commoners, the latter consisting of farmers and others. With the conquest of the Nagas and Dravidians, another group, or *varna*, was added. In this class were grouped all the

dark-skinned peoples who had been brought under the control of the Aryans. Thus, the early caste system was one based on color. In fact, the word *varna* means “color.”

In time, the Aryans intermingled with their subjects, and the caste system changed. No longer was it based on race or color. The varna to which people were assigned depended on their means of livelihood. There were still four varnas, but in time, these varnas came to be divided into thousands of *jatis*, or castes. A fifth group, the *untouchables*, did not belong to any varna. Hence, they were *outcastes*.

The four varnas consisted of the *Brahmins* (priests), the *Kshatriyas* (rulers and warriors), the *Vaishyas* (artisans, merchants, storekeepers, and farmers), and the lowly *Sudras*, or *Shudras* (unskilled workers and servants). Each of these groups is discussed below.

Brahmins (also Brahmans)

The Brahmins made up the top class in the caste system. The Hindu scriptures taught that they sprang from the mouth of Brahma, the chief Hindu god. They were both priests and scholars, and their position came with many rights and privileges. For example, the Aryan code of law stated that a king could not tax a Brahmin. If a king were so bold, it was believed that an angry Brahmin could recite curses and mystical texts that would destroy both the king and his army. Therefore, Brahmins were exempt from all taxes.

The Aryan code of law also granted Brahmins a monopoly on learning and knowledge. They were the accepted experts in education, literature, and above all, the Vedas. They protected their knowledge of the Vedas to the point that the lowest class, the Sudras, were never allowed to hear or recite anything from them. If a Sudra overheard the reading of

the Vedas, the law provided that molten lead be poured into his ears. If he so much as recited a verse from the sacred scriptures, his tongue was to be split. And if he memorized any of the Vedic text, the law provided that his body be cut in two. Do you think it goes without saying that the average Sudra stayed as far away from the Vedas as he could?

Brahmins, again, had many privileges, and they lived lives of ease. They did no actual work, being supported by gifts and the fees they collected from overseeing various religious functions. But being a Brahmin had a downside, also. A Brahmin was expected to bathe every day (keep in mind that daily baths for most people did not come into vogue until almost the 20th century), and there were many foods he was forbidden to eat. These included onions, eggs, mushrooms and garlic. And he could drink nothing but water.

Another negative associated with being a Brahmin concerned punishment for crimes. Any Brahmin who broke a law was punished more severely than a person from a lower caste who broke the same law. If, for example, a Sudra stole something, he was fined eight times the value of what he stole. Vaishyas were fined sixteen times the value of the same object stolen, while Kshatriyas had to pay thirty-two fold. But a Brahmin accused of a similar theft was fined a whopping sixty-four times the value of the stolen object.

Kshatriyas

The Kshatriya caste was made up of the rulers and warriors. They were said to have sprung from the arms of Brahma. Hence, their role as fighters. A Kshatriya was permitted to learn but not teach the Vedas. His main function was to either rule or fight. Unlike a Brahmin, he could indulge in alcohol. He considered the highest honor that could befall him was





to die in battle. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which forms part of the *Mahabharata*, one of the Hindu holy books (more about this in Chapter Seven), lists the Kshatriya's duties as



India's strict caste system dates back to about 1500 B.C., when Aryan invaders from central Asia attacked India. Initially instituted by the conquering Aryans to prohibit contact between themselves and the native population, the caste system later became one of the teachings of Hinduism.

exhibiting courage, bravery, cleverness, fearlessness, generosity, and knowledge of how to rule a kingdom.

Vaishyas

The Vaishyas made up the merchant class. Hindu scriptures stated that they sprang from the thighs or the lap of Brahma. They included storekeepers, traders, and craftsmen. Farmers were originally also part of this caste. The duties of the Vaishyas centered around agriculture, cattle-tending, and trade. As time passed, the responsibility for farming and tending cattle fell to the Sudras, the lowest of the four varnas.

Sudras

At the bottom of the social order were the Sudras. They were thought to be associated with the feet of Brahma. Therefore, it was their duty to support the other varnas. The word *Sudra* meant "slave," and that is exactly what the upper varnas intended for the Sudras to be. This was the varna created to keep the dark-skinned people conquered by the Aryans "in their place."

Untouchables

Even lower than the Sudras was a group referred to as the *untouchables*. They were called this because people in the upper varnas believed they would become defiled or polluted if they touched them. Because they did not belong to any caste, untouchables were also known as *outcastes*. Some untouchables were prisoners of war. Others were criminals. Many people became untouchables after they violated a rule and were thrown out of their particular castes.

Untouchables performed tasks no one else would do. These tasks included cleaning and tanning animal hides, sweeping the streets, and dealing with corpses. Although they were never physically mistreated, untouchables were discriminated against at every turn. They could not draw water from a well used by the higher varnas, enter a temple frequented by Brahmins, or send their children to Hindu schools. Some upper-caste Hindus even believed that the shadow of an untouchable would cause them to become unclean.

As you will learn in Chapter Eight of this book, caste discrimination against so-called "untouchables" was eventually outlawed in India. But its practice remained strong well into the 20th century. Historian Will Durant, in *Our Oriental Heritage*, relates an incident that occurred in 1913 that shows how strongly Hindus felt about any contact

with an untouchable. In that year, the child of a rich Hindu fell into a fountain. No one was around to help the mother except a passing untouchable who offered to dive into the fountain and rescue the child, but the mother refused his help. So strong were her feelings of revulsion toward the untouchable that she let her child drown rather than have his savior defile the water in the fountain.

A Summary

The Hindu religion upheld the caste system. It taught that people were born into a certain varna, and a jati or caste within that varna, and that they remained in it all their lives. Their jobs, who they married, and even what they ate were determined by their particular caste. Were they condemned to remain in one caste or varna forever? Not necessarily. Hindus, like Buddhists, believe in reincarnation. That is the belief that people are born into a different life form after they die. According to Hindu teachings, if one led a good life while on

earth he or she might be reborn into a higher caste. It all depends on one's karma in his or her present life. Karma has to do with one's actions and behavior while living. You will learn about samsara, or reincarnation, and karma, as well as the Hindu desire to attain moksha, in Chapter Two, "Beliefs and Worship."



Section Review:

1. What led the Aryans to establish the caste system?
2. What is the difference between a *varna* and a *jati*, or caste?
3. What four varnas made up the caste system?
4. What were Sudras forbidden to hear or recite?
5. What was the duty of the Kshatriyas?
6. Why were those who were outside the caste system referred to as "untouchables"?
7. In what way did Hinduism uphold the caste system?

Words to remember:

caste system
varna
jatis
untouchables
Brahmins
Kshatriyas
Vaishyas
Sudras
Bhagavad Gita
Mahabharata
reincarnation
karma
moksha

For Further Thought:

1. What are some similarities between a caste system and a class system? How are the systems different? Does every society have a class system? If so, of which class do you consider yourself a member?
2. Put yourself in the place of the woman who refused the help of a passing untouchable even though her child was drowning in a fountain. Had you been there, do you think you would have done the same? Why or why not?
3. Compare/contrast the Aryan segregation of the dark-skinned peoples of the Indus Valley to the treatment of African-Americans in the South in the years before and after the Civil War. Who would you say suffered the most?
4. In your opinion, what are the underlying causes of prejudice and discrimination? Can either be prevented?
5. Find more information about the ancient Indus Valley cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa and write a two-page report describing them. Include a sketch with your report.
6. Pretend you are a young child in an untouchable family of yesteryear. Create a dialogue you might have had with your parents as to why you can't attend the same schools as other Hindus or even draw water from the same fountains. Ask why you must accept and live under such discriminatory laws.