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| **LESSON 2**  **History of South Asia**  **ESSENTIAL QUESTION: *How do governments change?*** | |
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| *South Asia is home to one of the oldest known civilizations. You will learn about the birth of a civilization and the struggle for independence by studying its rich history.*  **Early South Asia**  ***How did South Asia’s early history lay the foundation for modern life in the region?***  The history of South Asia stretches back thousands of years. The region has experienced much change, yet many social structures and religious beliefs are steeped in tradition.  **Early Civilizations**  In the early 1920s, archaeologists in South Asia discovered the remains of one of the oldest known civilizations. Because of its location near the Indus River, this culture is known as the Indus Valley civilization. Its origins date back to 3500 B.C.. The Indus Valley civilization formed about the same time as other river-valley civilizations around the world.  Two major centers of Indus Valley culture were located at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro in modern-day Pakistan. These were large cities. Archaeologists have also discovered dozens of smaller settlements.  Written records by the Indus Valley people—mainly strings of symbols—have never been fully deciphered, but archaeological excavations indicate that the civilization was advanced. City streets were laid out in a grid-like pattern. Most houses were made of brick and had their own wells. Houses even had bathrooms and drains. Although most residents were farmers, craftsmanship flourished, as is evident from toys and other artifacts. Some of the same artifacts show that people traded over long distances. |  |

The Indus Valley culture lasted for about 1,000 years. What brought it to an end? No one knows for sure. A natural disaster such as an earthquake may have occurred. Disease or enemy invasions might have played a part in bringing down the civilization.

Equally mysterious are the beginnings of the Aryans, a group that swept into what is now India in about 1500 B.C. They came from the northwest, probably from southern Russia and central Asia. Were they invaders, migrants, or wandering nomads? There are different theories about the Aryans. They likely herded sheep, cows, and other livestock in their homeland. Once in India, they settled down to become farmers.

The Aryan civilization lasted for about 1,000 years. It left behind two important legacies for South Asians. The first legacy was social. Aryans believed that society could be successful only if people followed strict roles and tasks. So, they established a system of varnas, or castes. **Castes** were social classes. The top class was made up of Brahmans, or priests. Next came the warriors. Third were the merchants. The bottom class consisted of laborers and peasants.

The caste system had a deep impact on South Asia for thousands of years, causing much inequality. If they were born into a lower caste, people could not move up in society, regardless of their talents. After India won its independence in 1947, the new country outlawed the caste system. Some effects of the system are still present though.

The second major legacy of the Aryans was literary. Recall that scholars have not been able to fully decipher the Indus Valley writing. In contrast, the Aryans composed long poetic texts, called the Vedas, in the ancient Sanskrit language. Sanskrit is the parent language of Hindi, one of the most important languages in modern India. Sanskrit also greatly influenced the development of ancient Greek and Latin.

The Vedas were religious hymns handed down orally for many centuries before they were written down. The Rig Veda [rihg vay•duh] likely took shape around 1200 B.C. This poem is a series of hymns in honor of Aryan deities. The hymns are full of vivid imagery and philosophical ideas. This poem laid the foundation for the growth of Hinduism.

**Religious Traditions**

South Asia is the birthplace of several major religions. The first of these is Hinduism. Often described as a way of life, Hinduism has no founder, no holy book, and no central set of core beliefs. Hindus usually pay respect to the Vedas and take part in religious rituals, either at home or in a local temple.

Hindus believe in **reincarnation**, or the rebirth of a soul in another body. Related to this idea is karma—the belief that actions in this life can affect your next life. After many lifetimes, an enlightened soul can be released from the reincarnation cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Then the soul enters nirvana, a state of eternal bliss.

Around 500 B.C., two new religions arose in South Asia in response to Hinduism and its emphasis on the caste system. The first was Jainism. This religion was based on the Hindu principle of ahimsa, or noninjury. Followers of Jainism turned from farming to commerce so they would not have to kill or injure any living creature.

The second new religion began in northeastern India. It was founded by a noble prince named Siddhārtha Gautama. When he was 29 years old, Siddhārtha gave up his wealthy lifestyle and traveled in poverty, searching for spiritual truth. He reached his goal at the age of 35 and became known as “the Buddha,” or “the enlightened one.” He passed on to his followers what he believed to be the Four Noble Truths:

* Life is full of suffering.
* The cause of suffering is selfish desire.
* Suffering can be stopped by conquering desire.
* Desire can be conquered by following the Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right way of living, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Buddhists, like Jains, largely rejected the caste system. Hinduism remains the major religion throughout India today. Buddhism has spread to other Asian countries, while Jainism remains a small but vibrant religion in India.

**Three Indian Empires**

The Aryan civilization faded by 500 B.C. Around 200 years later, another power arose: the Mauryas. The Mauryas conquered much of South Asia. Their most famous ruler was named Ashoka. A highly successful warrior, he converted to Buddhism around 260 B.C. and adopted a life of nonviolence. His conversion influenced many people throughout the subcontinent. Trade and culture thrived under his rule.

Hundreds of years later, another empire, the Guptas, managed to unify much of northern India. Under the ruler Chandragupta I, science, medicine, mathematics, and the arts flourished. Gupta scholars developed the decimal system in mathematics that we still use today.

Finally, during the 1500s and 1600s, India witnessed the flowering of a third great empire: the Mughals. In contrast to earlier emperors, Mughal rulers were Muslim rather than Hindu. They were the first Indian emperors to be members of a minority religion. During this era, many South Asians converted to Islam.

Some of the Mughals were tolerant. Akbar the Great, who ruled from 1556 to 1605, was a devoted Muslim, but he encouraged freedom of religion. He regularly held discussions with religious scholars. As with the Mauryas and the Guptas, culture, science, and the arts flourished under the Mughals. The architectural monument known as the Taj Mahal was constructed by the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, in memory of his beloved wife.

***Identifying*** What two especially important legacies did the Aryans leave behind?

**Modern South Asia**

***How has conflict in South Asia led to change?***

Since their early history, South Asians have been no strangers to conflict. Then, beginning in the late 1800s, a combination of internal and external factors led to great changes in the region.

**The British in South Asia**

Beginning in the 1500s, European countries used improved ships and maps in exploration. In the 1600s, British traders established settlements in India. With the decline of the Mughal Empire, the traders became a powerful presence in South Asia. The British were especially interested in textiles, timber, and tea.

After a bloody rebellion in northern India in 1857, the British government took direct control of most of South Asia. They ruled over what is today India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The British used the name India to refer to the entire area. By this time, India was a British colony rather than a trading partner. Although the British built railways, schools, and ports, Indians resented a foreign presence in their land. In the late 1800s, an independence movement began.

**Achieving Independence**

In 1885, less than 30 years after the rebellion of 1857, Indian supporters of independence formed the Indian National Congress. The British, however, were reluctant to give up the **Raj**, as their imperialist rule of India was called. The Congress responded by endorsing a **boycott**. A boycott means refusing to buy or use certain goods—in this case, Indians refused to buy imported British goods.

In the early 1900s, two members of the Congress became leaders. The first was Mohandas K. Gandhi. Often called “Mahatma,” which means “great soul,” Gandhi studied law. He practiced law in South Africa, where the racist **policies** shocked and angered him. He returned to India determined to fight for independence from the British.

Gandhi was deeply opposed to violence. His most powerful weapon against British rule was **civil disobedience**, or nonviolent resistance. He was joined by a younger leader, Jawaharlal Nehru. Also trained as a lawyer, Nehru was the son of one of the original leaders of the Congress. Gandhi and Nehru finally succeeded in persuading the British to leave South Asia and surrender colonial rule. India became independent in August 1947. Conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, however, divided the subcontinent.

**India and Pakistan**

Since Mughal times, South Asia has been troubled by religious and cultural divisions between Hindus and Muslims. In 1947, as part of the independence settlement, the British negotiated a division of the subcontinent. Two countries were created: India (mainly Hindu) and Pakistan (mainly Muslim). To complicate matters, Pakistan was divided into western and eastern sectors. In the 1970s, East Pakistan achieved independence after a civil war and became the country of Bangladesh.

Tensions between India and Pakistan did not die down. The two countries have fought several wars and are involved in a dispute over the region of Kashmir, located in the Himalaya and Karakoram mountain ranges. In the late 1990s, both countries developed nuclear weapons. Because of this**nuclear proliferation**, or the spread of enormously powerful atomic weapons, conflict between the two countries could prove dangerous.

***Describing*** What countries were created out of the South Asia subcontinent? What religions do the people of these countries follow?

**Lesson 2 Review**

**Reviewing Vocabulary**

1. How has the *caste* system influenced life in South Asia?

**Answering the Guiding Questions**

1. ***Describing*** How are the religions of Jainism and Buddhism alike? How are they different?
2. ***Determining Central Ideas*** Why are Hindu-Muslim conflicts in South Asia so significant to the history of the region?

**4. *Narrative Writing*** You are a time traveler whose machine can transport you to any one of the following: the Indus Valley cities of

Harappa or Mohenjo-Daro; the empires of Ashoka or Akbar the Great; or the struggle for independence by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi. Write a brief story describing what you see and hear in the time and setting of your choice.