There is more joy in doing one’s own duty imperfectly than in doing another man’s duty well.”

EXCERPT FROM THE GREAT INDIAN EPIC BHAGAVAD GITA (BAH-GEE-VAH GEE-TAH)

Gahvar’s arms felt like they might fall off at any moment! All day he had been carrying heavy baskets of peppers and spices to his father’s food shop in the market. Although he was tempted to fill the next basket only part way, Gahvar remembered that it was his “dharma” or duty, to help his father. Gahvar knew that he would most likely take over his father’s shop one day and continue the family traditions, after all, this was his caste, his position in society. All of his family and friends were just like him, in the same caste. It never occurred to him to wish he could be in a higher caste, after all, he wasn’t better than his family or friends! Gahvar loaded his next basket with peppers, all the way to the top, and started walking back towards the market, happy that he was helping his father and fulfilling his dharma.

OVERVIEW QUESTIONS

• How do cultural ideas, beliefs and traditions of a society influence their political, economic, and social systems?
• In what ways is the older traditional culture still seen in modern society today?
Background

The Aryan people migrated to the Indus River Valley around 1500 BCE and introduced the people of the Indian subcontinent to the religious ideas and traditions that in time became known as Hinduism. Over the centuries, Hindu beliefs and practices became the glue that united the vast land of India and helped shape its social, political and economic systems.

One of the most important Hindu influences was the caste system. A caste is a social class that reflects someone’s role in society. Like other ancient societies, the Aryans of the Indus River Valley, had divided into social classes as they developed complex civilizations. The caste system created a way of organizing the society and kept it stable. During the Gupta Empire, the caste system became strongly established in Indian culture. The people knew their place in society and what was expected of them. Castes determined what jobs people could hold, whom they could marry and where they could live.

Religious leaders called Brahmins became the highest and most influential caste as Hinduism spread. These were the educated leaders who advised village councils and powerful local princes. They preserved ancient traditions such as the caste system. Hindu ideas such as dharma helped people accept the caste system and its rules. Remember that dharma means duty to do the right thing to fulfill one’s role in life, whatever it is. Hindus believed that they would develop good karma and increase their chances of being born into a higher caste in their next life by obeying their caste rules.

Though India was sometimes unified, over the centuries civil wars and foreign invasions kept India divided into small states. It was India’s common religion, Hinduism, which provided important social unity for the people. During the Gupta Empire the beliefs of Hinduism became solidified and established. Great epic poems and stories which taught people Hindu beliefs and traditions were written down. Later generations would remember and learn the same Hindu truths and stories through the poems. The Hindu foundation laid in the Gupta Empire would help India during it’s many other years of unrest and disunity.
**Political System**

**The Gupta Come to Power**

One of the most significant periods of political unity for India came in 320 CE as the powerful Gupta Empire developed. Chandragupta I (Chan drah GOOP tah) established a new dynasty for India by conquering weaker empires in Northern India. His son, and later his grandsons, continued this pattern of conquest and expansion to eventually unite all of Northern India into one empire.

The Gupta empire was not all powerful though. The farther away from the capital a region was, the less control the Emperor had. Instead, the Emperor allowed local officials, rather than ones he appointed, to rule for him in the far away regions and states.

The Guptas ruled for more than 200 years. It was called the Golden Age of India because it was a period of political peace and economic prosperity, as well as a period of great advances in mathematics, science and the arts. During this Golden Age, Hinduism became an even stronger unifying force in Indian life.

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**Economic System**

**Towns & Trade**

Under the political and military unity of the Gupta empire, trade expanded, both within India and with distant peoples from Europe, Africa, and Asia. Gupta merchants had many luxury goods to trade, including gems, pearls, spices, perfumes, fine cotton cloths and woods like teak and ebony. In exchange, they bought silk from China, horses from Saudi Arabia and gold from Rome.

As trade grew, Indian towns developed guilds. Guilds are organizations created by workers to set prices and regulate the quality of their work. Members of the same craft guild often lived and worked in the same parts of town. For example, the potters would live in one area, the weavers in another. Guilds are different from castes because they were organized by the type of job someone had; castes were organized by social levels. Despite that difference, there were many overlaps, since members of the same guild might also be in the same caste.
Social System
Traditional Hindu Society

Under Gupta rulers, the caste system was strengthened and it became nearly impossible to move from one level of society to another. Members of different castes were isolated from one another. If you were born into a middle caste made up of artisans such as potters and weavers you were only allowed to associate with people in your caste. No one higher. No one lower. The “untouchables” or “outcasts” held the lowest place in Hindu society and were given the lowliest, dirtiest jobs. Women had even fewer rights than men and were expected to obey and serve their fathers, brothers, and husbands. This Hindu belief is still practiced in some villages where boys are more highly valued than girls.

Also during this era, many great Hindu epic poems and stories, passed down for centuries through the oral tradition, were written down. Therefore, more people learned about the gods and religious duties described in such epics as the Mahabharata (MAH-hab-ar-atta) and the Ramayana (RAHM-ah-yah-nah). They told of battles between real rulers as well as battles between gods and monsters. Throughout the stories, beliefs and practices of Hinduism are taught.

Contributions/Impact on the World
Advances in Math and Medicine

The Gupta empire’s economic success also meant that more resources could be used for learning. Religious schools and universities grew, although they were only open to men of the upper castes. Scholars from other parts of Asia also came to the great Indian cities to study. Indian scholars made many important contributions to the world during this time.

Mathematics:
• Development of the concept of zero, symbols for the numeral 1-9, and the decimal system. This opened the door to higher math. Arab scholars adopted these symbols centuries later, eventually bringing them to Europe.

Medicine:
• Development of new medicines from natural sources, such as plants and animals.
• Development of medical practices such as the importance of keeping wounds clean.
• Development of the scalpel (surgical blade), the beginnings of plastic surgery, and strategies for setting broken bones.

India Today

1500 years later, Hinduism continues to play a very important role in Indian culture. Hindu families still honor the same gods and follow many of the same religious traditions. The caste system still exists in much of the country. However, some practices that discriminated against women, the “untouchables” and the lowest castes have been outlawed. Nearly 800 million Indians are Hindu, nearly 80 percent of the population. However, other religions have also played important roles in India. Buddhism, an important religion in many Asian nations today, was born in India. For a time it played an influential role in Indian society, but over time Buddhism blended into Hinduism in India and was no longer considered a separate religion there. Islam also developed many followers in India over the centuries. That’s because many of the invaders from the north were Muslims. Christianity developed while the British controlled parts of India from as early as 1690 to 1947. During the twentieth century, many conflicts developed between Muslim and Hindu Indians. When India gained its independence from Britain, the nation of Pakistan was created as a home for the growing Muslim population in the region. Today much tension continues to exist between Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan.