

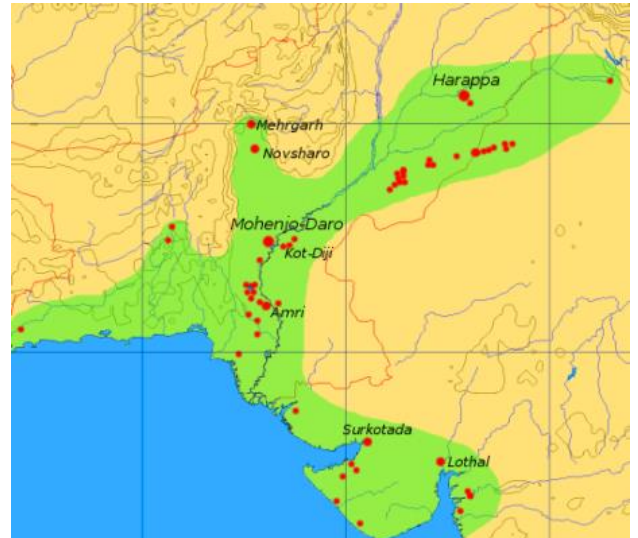
7: Early India *Applying the Model*

Background

Civilization developed before 5000 BCE in what is now northwestern India, Pakistan, and part of Afghanistan in the valleys of the Indus and Sarasvati Rivers (the Sarasvati has since dried up). This civilization, called “Harrapan,” was in many ways similar to the civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt, relying on a muddy river that sometimes flooded, leaving fertile soil.

At its peak, Harrapan civilization covered more territory than either Mesopotamia or Egypt, probably had a larger population, and was, in some ways, more advanced.

For example, cities in this region had sophisticated systems for supplying fresh water to homes and disposing of waste, better than any in the other two ancient civilizations. They seem to have had some form of writing (not yet deciphered in modern times), and developed advanced ceramics and smelted metals—copper, tin, lead, and bronze (a copper-tin alloy harder than either metal alone). Once civilization was established, Harrapans traded extensively with Mesopotamians and Egyptians (using ocean-going boats).



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Aryan_migration_theory



Around 1800 BCE the civilization largely collapsed, apparently because of a drought caused by climate change that also affected Egypt and Mesopotamia. However, at this point, people moved extensively into other parts of the Indian subcontinent, taking with them their Harrapan-based patterns of action.

◀Excavation of a Harappan city. Foreground: remains of a public bath. <http://imgarcade.com/1/great-bath-of-harappan-civilization/>

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Investigation: Life in Early India

Below are excerpts from a document written by a Greek historian named Arrian, copied from writings of a traveler who visited India, probably about 310-300 BCE. The traveler, called Megasthenes, toured the region in one of the times of splendor of the Maurya dynasty. His accounts are the earliest known written information about the region.¹

Read the following descriptions, identifying similarities with Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations, and important differences, especially in patterns of action and shared ideas.

India has many huge mountains which abound in fruit trees of every kind, and many vast plains of great fertility—more or less beautiful, but all alike intersected by a multitude of rivers.

The greater part of the soil, moreover, is under irrigation, and consequently bears two crops in the course of the year. It teems at the same time with animals of all sorts—beasts of the field and fowls of the air—of all different degrees of strength and size. It is prolific, besides, in elephants, which are of monstrous bulk, as its soil supplies food in unsparing profusion, making these animals far to exceed in strength those that are bred in Libya [Africa]. Since they are caught in great numbers by the Indians and trained for war, they are of great importance in helping win victory.

India has many large, navigable rivers, which start in the mountains which stretch along the northern frontier and cross the level country. Some of these rivers, after uniting with each other, drain into the river called the Ganges. This river, which at its mouth is 30 stadia broad, flows from north to south, and empties its waters into the ocean. It forms the eastern boundary of the Gangaridai, a nation which possesses a vast force of the largest-sized elephants. Because of this, their country has never been conquered by any foreign king. All other nations dread the overwhelming number and strength of these animals. (Thus Alexander the Macedonian, after conquering all Asia, did not make war upon the Gangaridai, as he did on all others; for when he had arrived with all his troops at the river Ganges, and had subdued all the other Indians, he abandoned as hopeless an invasion of the Gangaridai when he learned that they possessed four thousand elephants well trained and equipped for war.)

(Stadion—plural “stadia”— 184.9 m. or 202.2 yd.)

¹ <http://www.sdstate.edu/projectsouthasia/upload/Megasthene-Indika.pdf>

The whole population of India is divided into seven castes. The first is made up of the group of philosophers. This caste has fewer members than any other class, but is the greatest of all castes in dignity. The philosophers, being exempted from all public duties, are neither the masters nor the servants of others. They are, however, employed by other people to offer the religious sacrifices required during a lifetime, and to celebrate the observances of the dead. They are believed to be close and important to the gods, and to know more than others about death and the fate of those who have died. In return for such services they receive valuable gifts and privileges.

To the people of India at large they also give great benefits. Gathered together at the beginning of the year, they forewarn the assembled multitudes about droughts and wet weather, and also about beneficial winds, and diseases, and other topics important to listeners. Thus the people and the ruler, learning beforehand what is to happen, always make adequate provision against a coming shortage, and never fail to prepare beforehand what will help in a time of need. The philosopher who errs in his predictions incurs no other penalty than being condemned, and he then observes silence for the rest of his life.

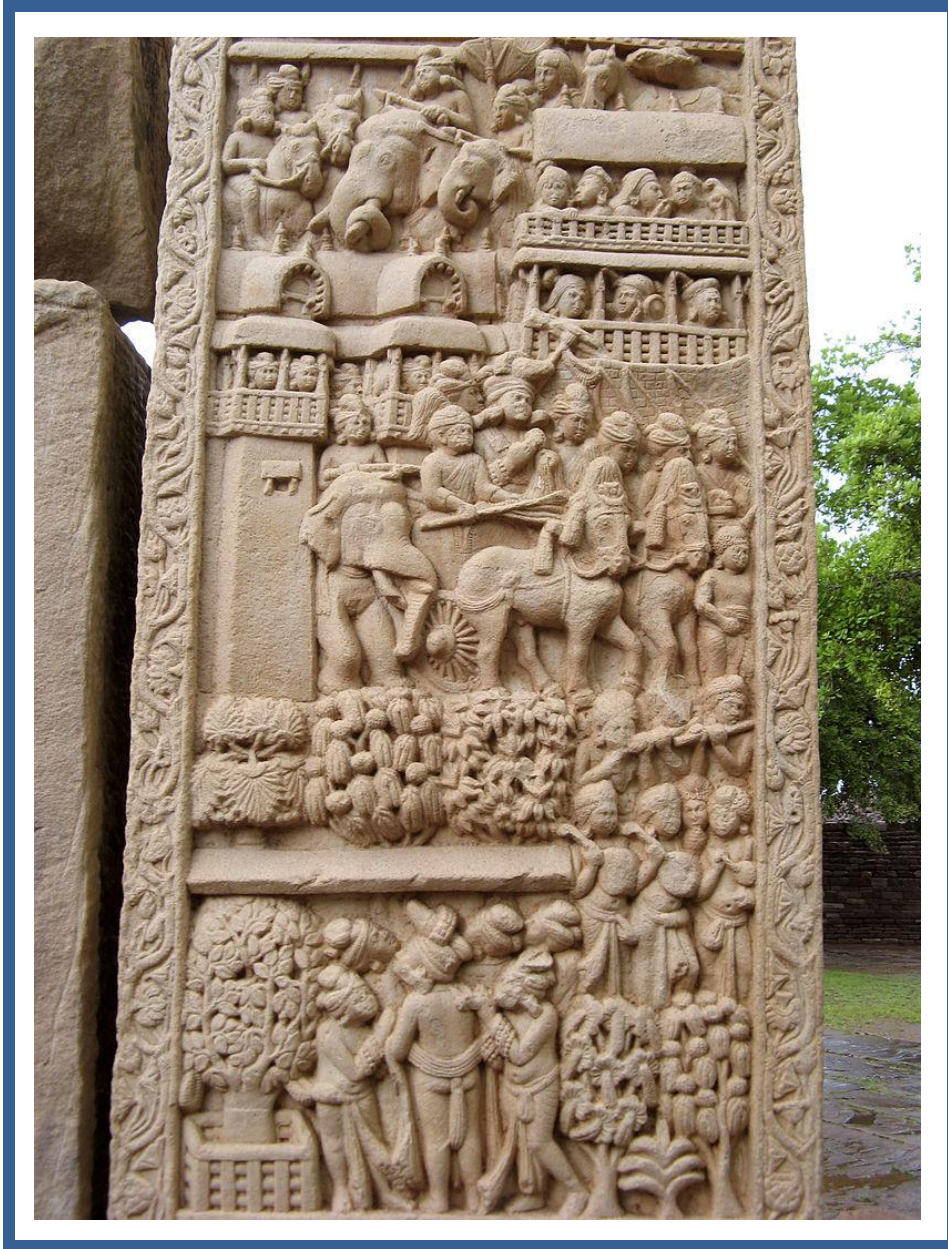
The second caste consists of the farmers, who appear to be far more numerous than the others. Being, moreover, exempted from fighting and other public services, they devote the whole of their time to tillage. An enemy coming upon a farmer at work on his land will not do him any harm. Men of this class are regarded as public benefactors, and are protected from all injury. The land is not damaged by armies, and produces heavy crops, supplying the inhabitants with all that is needed to make life very enjoyable. The farmers themselves, with their wives and children, live in the country, and entirely avoid going into town. They pay a land-tribute to the king, because all India is the property of the crown, and no private person is permitted to own land. Besides the land-tribute, they pay into the royal treasury a fourth part of the crops they grow.

The third caste consists of the cowherds and shepherds and other herdsmen who neither settle in towns nor in villages, but live in tents. By hunting and trapping they clear the country of noxious birds and wild beasts. As they apply themselves eagerly and carefully to this activity, they free India from the pests with which it abounds—all sorts of wild beasts, and birds which devour the seeds sown by the farmers.

The fourth caste consists of the artisans. Of these some are armorers, while others make the implements which farmers and others find useful in their different callings. This class is not only exempted from paying taxes, but even receives maintenance from the royal treasury.

The fifth caste is the military. It is well organized and equipped for war, holds the second place in point of numbers, and gives itself up to idleness and amusement in the times of peace. The entire force—men-at-arms, war-horses, war-elephants, and all—are maintained at the king's expense.

(Continued)



◀ Detail from the “Sanchi Stupa,” the oldest stone structure in India, built in the 3rd century BCE, in the same period as the descriptions of India (above and following) were written.

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CAcQjRw&url=http%3A%2F%2Fdatatab.us%2F%2Fi%2FMauryan&ei=i5mNVdLEO8aaNpCzhLgB&psig=AFQjCNFIimMMGczJ6eusCu2gbeXa8yCbXOQ&ust=1435429590579812>

What parts of the Model (Setting, Patterns of Action, Demographics, Shared Ideas) are suggested by this carving?

The sixth caste consists of the overseers. It is their responsibility to inquire into and superintend all that goes on in India, and report to the king, or, where there is not a king, to the ruling council.

The seventh caste consists of the councilors and assessors—those who deliberate on public affairs. It has few members, but is highly respected, on account of the high character and wisdom of its members. Advisers to the king are chosen from this caste, along with the state treasurers and the judges who settle disputes. Also, the generals of the army and the chief magistrates usually belong to this class.

These are the groups into which the people of India are divided. No one is allowed to marry out of his own caste, or to exercise any calling or art except his own. For instance, a soldier cannot become a farmer, or an artisan a philosopher.

The Indians all live simply at low expense, especially when in camp. They dislike a large undisciplined group of people, so they are well-behaved. Theft is very rare. The people have no written laws, but are ignorant of writing, and must therefore in all the business of life trust to memory. They live, nevertheless, happily enough, being simple in their manners and frugal.

They never drink wine except at sacrifices. Their beverage is a liquor made from rice instead of barley, and their food is principally a rice-based stew. The simplicity of their laws and their contracts is proved by the fact that they seldom go before judges. They have no suits about pledges or deposits, nor do they require either seals or witnesses, but make their deposits and confide in each other.

Their houses and property they generally leave unguarded. These things indicate that they possess good, sober sense; but other things they do which one cannot approve: for instance, they always eat alone, and have no fixed hours when meals are to be taken by all in common, but each one eats when he feels inclined. The contrary custom would be better for the ends of social and civil life.

A person convicted of lying about official matters suffers mutilation of his hands or feet. He who maims any person not only suffers in return the loss of the same limb, but his hand also is cut off. If he causes an artisan to lose his hand or his eye, he is put to death.

Their tombs are plain, and the mounds raised over the dead are small.

In contrast to the general simplicity of their style, they love finery and ornament. Their robes are worked in gold, and ornamented with precious stones, and they wear also flowered garments made of the finest muslin. Attendants walking behind hold up umbrellas over them: for they have a high regard for beauty, and avail themselves of every device to improve their looks. Truth and virtue they hold alike in esteem. Hence they accord no special privileges to the old unless they possess superior wisdom. They marry many wives, whom they buy from the parents, giving in exchange a yoke of oxen.

In this last paragraph, do you think the writer was describing Indian people in general or a smaller group? Give reasons for your answer.

Identify possible kinds of work that wouldn't fit with one of the seven castes described by Megasthenes (for example, merchants). How might these kinds of work be handled?

What might be a good reason for making castes rigid—not allowing farmers to become soldiers or artisans, for example?

Branching Out:

If you have access to an older native of India, compare their description of more recent Indian castes to the ones described in Megasthenes's account. Do you think differences reflect changes in India, or was Megasthenes incomplete or wrong?

For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:

This unit, and the one that follows (Early China) introduce no new concepts, but provide an opportunity to apply the Model. Either or both of them may be included or omitted from the course with no significant impact on later studies. Including them may, of course, be of particular interest to learners linked to either of the societies by ethnicity or descent.

One possibility is to use one or both of the units to evaluate learner ability to apply the elements of the Model learned to this point.

As we've said elsewhere, a major problem with conventional narrative history is that it's "processed" information. The thought-provoking work has been done long before kids see it. The best test of complex skills and understandings is requiring them to be put to work in unfamiliar contexts.

More advanced learners might use the materials individually, rather than working in groups. Younger learners, or those less advanced, could, of course, analyze the data in the usual way. Another possibility is to assign different units to different work groups or individuals, and have them report their findings to others.

The main objective is growth of learner analytical skills and understanding of the Model when it's applied to unfamiliar societies or cultural systems.

Notes on the Investigation

The seven castes described by Megasthenes are significantly different from the more-recent traditional Indian castes with their rigid hierarchy and elaborate rules about ritual pollution. Under the leadership of the Congress Party, discrimination based on India's caste system was declared illegal in 1950, but it remains a part of customs and attitudes, especially in rural areas, which are slow to change. It is, of course, also perpetuated by economic status associated with caste hierarchy—high-paying professional jobs go to upper-caste individuals whose well-off parents are able to pay for advanced education, for example.

On a visit to India a few years ago, one of the authors¹ was entering the small apartment building in New Delhi where his host and hostess lived. He noted a family living under the front steps, ironing spotless, gleaming white bedsheets with a charcoal-fired iron. His hostess explained that they did laundry for the residents of the building, and that this kind of work was performed by people of the lowest caste.

His hostess told him, "I offered to pay the expenses so their children could go to school, but the parents refused. They told me, 'If our children are educated, what can they do? There will be no jobs for them.'"

Castes were rigid in ancient India probably because (a) the specialized work performed by each caste changed very little from generation to generation, and (b) this work was

¹ Howard Brady

taught by parents and other older members of the group to the young—the only education system then present. In many cases, the craft or profession being learned was complex enough that a legacy system was needed to maintain proficiency. Observing caste boundaries helped ensure that essential skills and knowledge wouldn't be lost. (Of course, eventually ritualized ideas about purity reinforced boundaries and maintained social stability, at the expense of the loss of creative change and the advantages of diversity.)

The caste descriptions by Megasthenes were likely an oversimplified description of Indian society at the time. For example, workers who dealt with the less savory tasks required in all societies may have occupied their own caste (as in later times) and were overlooked in his account. In addition, other kinds of work—e.g. trading, mining, operating ships, constructing buildings and public works—don't fall clearly within one of the castes. These other essential tasks may have been assigned by tradition to one of the seven castes he describes, or have been considered too unimportant to mention.

(HLB) July 2015