

1. The Indus Valley Civilization

PREVIEW

What came to be called *Hinduism* was an amalgamation of beliefs and practices from several sources. This chapter focuses on the first of the two major contributors: the Indus Valley Civilization. In subsequent chapters we will focus on the second: the Indo-Aryans. The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization in the nineteenth century revealed a sophisticated and long-forgotten ancient culture that appears to have contributed to the development of the Hindu traditions. In this chapter, we examine the architectural ruins and artifacts left by this civilization and contemplate their import for its inhabitants and for subsequent Hindu history. This examination reveals that Indus Valley religion focused on maintaining ritual purity and appropriating divine powers to assist in reproduction and the maintenance of life. Finally, we introduce the Indo-Aryans with a brief discussion of their relationship to the dwellers of the Indus Valley.

Two major cultural streams contributed to the development of what later came to be called Hinduism. The first was an intriguing and sophisticated ancient culture known today as the **Indus Valley Civilization**. The second source was a nomadic people called the **Indo-Aryans**, whom most scholars believe migrated into India from Central Asia and bequeathed to Hindus their most sacred texts and rituals. In this and the next two chapters, we will study each of these cultures and explore their respective influences on the evolution of the Hindu Traditions (box 1.1).

The Indus Valley Civilization

In the nineteenth century, British engineers searching for ballast for a railway line in what

was then northwestern India and is now **Pakistan** stumbled upon the remains of an ancient city known only to locals. The engineers were only interested in the well-fired bricks from the ruins, and they proceeded to quarry the city for that resource. It was not until the early twentieth century, as other similar sites were uncovered, that archaeologists appreciated the full significance of this unwitting discovery. They determined that the ancient city, now reduced to railroad ballast, was part of a vast network of villages and towns constituting an entire civilization long forgotten by the rest of humanity. The discovery of this ancient culture, one of the most remarkable archaeological finds of modern times, compelled scholars to revise their understanding of the earliest history of India and has in recent years sparked a heated debate about the original inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent.

The Indus Valley Civilization, so named because many of its settlements were situated along the Indus River, turned out to be one of the great cultures of the ancient world.¹ What has come to light since the first excavations suggests that the Indus Valley Civilization was

as impressive as ancient Egypt and Sumeria. While many Hindus today do not regard the Indus Valley Civilization as part of their sacred history, the evidence suggests that this culture contributed significantly to the grand complex known to many as Hinduism.

Box 1.1 TWO VIEWS OF TIME

A Hindu View of Time

Traditional Hindus regard the passage of time as cyclical rather than linear. According to an ancient Hindu cosmology developed after the Vedic era, the universe undergoes a series of four successive ages, or *yugas*, of varying lengths before it is destroyed and re-created. The world's destruction at the end of the final yuga marks a new beginning, initiating a whole new cycle of yugas. This pattern has had no beginning and will have no end.

The first period, known as the Satya Yuga, is a golden age in which the gods maintain close relationships with human beings, who are naturally pious and live an average of a hundred thousand years. The later yugas—the Treta, Dvapara, and Kali (the current period)—are characterized by the decline of human piety and morality and evinced by cruelty, discord, materialism, lust, and shorter life spans. According to a common method of reckoning, the four yugas make one *Mahayuga*, lasting for a period of 4,320,000 human years. One *Mahayuga* is a single day in the life of Brahma, the creator god according to many traditions. A period of 360 Brahma-days equals one Brahma-year, and a Brahma lives one hundred such years. Thus, a Brahma lives 155,520,000,000,000 human years!

The Periods of Hindu History

Although most Hindus would not think of their history in a linear fashion, the following scheme is one way to view the stages of Hindu history.

3300–1400 B.C.E.	Indus Valley Civilization
1600–800 B.C.E.	Vedic Period
800–200 B.C.E.	Classical Period (coincident with the Axial Age)
200 B.C.E.–500 C.E.	Epic and Early Puranic Period
500–1500 C.E.	Medieval and Late Puranic Period
1500 C.E.–present	Modern Period

What is known about the Indus Valley culture comes exclusively from archaeological evidence, because its cryptic script has never been completely deciphered. We do not even know what the citizens of this civilization called themselves. The archaeological data indicate that the Indus Valley culture was established around 3300 B.C.E. and flourished between 2600 and 1900 B.C.E. Around 1900 B.C.E., it entered a period of decline and ultimately disappeared around 1400 B.C.E. At its height, the Indus Valley Civilization covered most of present-day Pakistan, the westernmost part of present-day India, and parts of Afghanistan, in an area estimated to include over five hundred thousand square miles (figure 1.1). Over fifteen hundred Indus Valley sites throughout this region have been unearthed so far, and most have yet to be fully excavated. Several hundred of these sites are large enough to be classi-

fied as villages or towns. The largest and most important are cities known as **Mohenjo-daro** and **Harappa**. These names are post-Indus Civilization designations that refer to towns built much later on the ruins of the ancient urban centers. In their heyday, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa may have each hosted a population as large as forty to fifty thousand, which was immense by ancient standards. Harappa appears to have been the capital, and accordingly the culture is sometimes referred to as the Harappan Civilization.

All of the Indus Valley municipalities were highly organized and carefully planned, displaying remarkably similar features. The uniformity of these cities suggests a centralized authority and code enforcement, since many of the settlements were over fifty miles apart. The remains of buildings and the layout of the towns indicate that their inhabitants prized order and



Fig. 1.1 The Indus Valley Civilization. The Indus Valley Civilization was spread throughout the northwestern part of the Indian Subcontinent in an area roughly the size of Texas. (Mapping Specialists.)

organization. But aside from the urban consistency that indicates central administration, we know very little about the way Indus dwellers governed themselves or structured their society. We also know little about their economy except that village life focused on agriculture and cattle herding and life in the larger cities centered on the production of arts and crafts. The discovery of Indus Valley artifacts as far away as Mesopotamia and Central Asia suggests that trade played a significant role in the Harappan economy.

Although the archaeological data do not tell the complete story of this society, they do reveal enough for scholars to make informed judgments about its worldview and religious practices. Yet, since literary sources are unavailable for corroboration, and because the artifacts are often ambiguous, these judgments remain conjectures and are frequently debated by experts. We will consider the archaeological discoveries that appear to have religious import and attempt to comprehend what they tell us about the Indus culture and its possible impact on the development of the Hindu Traditions.

Purity and Pollution

One of the most obvious and intriguing features of the Indus cities is the evidence that points to an intense concern with cleanliness. Private homes were furnished with sophisticated indoor bathing and toilet facilities that were plumbed and lined with ceramic tiles in a relatively modern way. The plumbing and sewer systems were superior to those found in other cultures of the time and are in fact superior to facilities found in many Indian and Pakistani homes today. Not only did individual homes feature advanced lavatories, but municipalities did as well. Mohenjo-daro and Harappa each had a large central bath with public access (figure 1.2). These public baths predate similar facilities in ancient Rome by many centuries. The ubiquity of the baths, their central locations, and the care with which they were constructed all point to a deep preoccupation with purity and cleanness.

Almost certainly, this concern was more than a matter of bodily hygiene. Like many premodern cultures, and like Hindus today, the Indus dwellers were probably anxious about



Fig. 1.2 The Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro. The prominence of this bathing facility in Mohenjo-daro suggests the centrality of ritual purity for the inhabitants of the Indus Valley Civilization. (Photo: © DeA Picture Library / Art Resource, N.Y.)

ritual purity. Ritual purity, as compared to hygiene, involves more than removing the sweat and grime that accumulate on the body and avoiding germs that cause disease. In its most basic sense, ritual purity is the state of cleanness that is required for approaching what is **sacred**, or holy. It often concerns what and how one eats, the kinds of clothes and ornamentation one wears, the flow of one's bodily fluids, and the great mysteries of life: birth, sex, and death. What counts as pure and impure varies greatly from culture to culture and time to time (box 1.2). Observant Jews and Muslims regard pork as unclean, but others consider it a great delicacy. Traditional Christianity once considered childbirth to be an occasion requiring ritual purification, but most contemporary Christians no longer regard it as such. In some societies, including Hindu India, one may become ritually contaminated simply by coming into contact with someone who is impure.

Despite the wide variation in practices, all purity regulations essentially involve maintaining a community's order, its sense of what is right and appropriate. Purity regulations are

not always explicit or written into law. Unspoken taboos are often laid upon those areas of life where one may run the risk of violating order. Societies impose these restrictions out of the shared belief that they prevent personal and social disorder, and for this reason many cultures enforce taboos with harsh punishments for violations. Whenever order has been violated, it must be restored to ensure social and personal well-being. Cultures therefore develop methods for reestablishing ritual purity.

We do not know what specific things the Indus dwellers regarded as ritually impure. Whatever the cause of impurity, the baths most likely served to remove contaminants and reinstate the order of things, just as public and private baths do in contemporary Hindu traditions. In modern India, the first religious act of the day for most Hindus is bathing, a ritual that brings the individual into the appropriate bodily and mental states for relating to the gods and other persons. Today, many Hindu temples have tanks or reservoirs that function as ritual baths. Many natural bodies of water, such as the river Ganges, serve this purpose as well (figure 1.3).



Fig. 1.3
Bathing in the Ganges. Bathing for ritual purification is still an important aspect of the religious practice of most Hindus. (Photo courtesy of Creative Commons, Ilya Mauter.)

Box 1.2 RITUAL IMPURITY

The kinds of activities considered to be ritually polluting vary from culture to culture and from time to time. There is often great variation within cultures as well. The following list delineates some of the activities that different religious traditions (or parts of those traditions) have regarded as unclean.

Judaism

- Eating pork, shellfish, catfish, amphibians, reptiles, bats, birds of prey, and snails
- Eating meat that has not been slaughtered in a prescribed manner
- Eating with non-Jews or using utensils used by non-Jews
- Drinking wine made by non-Jews
- Touching a dead body, a human bone, or a grave
- Touching someone with leprosy
- Menstruation
- Abnormal bodily discharges
- Childbirth
- Sexual intercourse
- Masturbation

Islam

- Touching a pig or dog
- Menstruation
- Eating pork, amphibians, reptiles, bats, and birds of prey
- Consuming alcohol
- Eating meat that has not been slaughtered in a prescribed manner
- Defecating
- Touching a corpse that is unwashed and has become cold
- Sleep or other forms of unconsciousness
- Flatulence

Shinto

- Sickness
- Contact with blood
- Death, especially that of one's father
- Speaking taboo words
- Wearing shoes in a home
- Wicked thoughts

Zoroastrianism

- Contact with dead bodies
- Coming into contact with snakes, flies, ants, or wolves
- Sickness
- Body waste such as excrement and clipped hair or nails
- Menstruation
- Miscarriage or stillbirth

Hinduism

- Tanning and leatherwork
- Eating meat
- Death
- Contact with dead bodies
- Scavenging
- Menstruation
- Eating food prepared by a person of a lower caste
- Childbirth
- Eating with the left hand
- Touching or seeing someone who is unclean

There, devout Hindus restore the pristine order that might have been disrupted by inappropriate behavior or thoughts, or by contact with a person who is deemed unclean. What we find in the sophisticated baths and lavatories of the Harappan Civilization is probably the earliest expression of religious practices that run throughout Hindu history.

Artifacts

In addition to architectural ruins, the excavation of the Indus Valley cities has revealed a host of intriguing artifacts. Some of the most interesting of these relics are the hundreds of tiny soapstone seals that were used to stamp designs into soft clay. These seals were probably used to mark property in the merchant trade, as one might use a signet ring. Similar seals have been found as far away as Mesopotamia, suggesting a commercial connection between these two civilizations. While the practical use of the Harappan seals is not so mysterious, the signifi-

cance of the images on the seals is still a matter of speculation and debate.

The great majority of the seals portray male animals with horns and massive flanks and legs (figure 1.4). Indeed, throughout the artifacts found in the Indus Valley ruins, the male sex is almost exclusively represented by animals; artistic representations of the human male are rare. Many of the animals are easily recognizable: buffaloes, elephants, rhinoceroses, bulls, tigers, and antelopes. But other seals display strange creatures that appear to be products of the imagination, such as a three-headed antelope and a bull with a single horn protruding from its forehead, like a unicorn's. This "unihorned" bull is one of the most common images on the seals. The bull often appears along with what seems to be a brazier or censer, either of which may have been used for ritual purposes. Braziers can be used for cooking sacrificial meat, and censers are receptacles for burning incense.

The soapstone images raise many questions. Why do they depict only *male* animals? Why



Fig. 1.4 Seals. Steatite, or soapstone, seals provide archaeological evidence for much of our understanding of Indus Valley religious practices. (Four on left: Scala / Art Resource, N.Y. Four on right: Borromeo / Art Resource, N.Y.)

is the male sex represented almost exclusively in animal rather than human form? Why do the images accentuate the animals' horns and flanks? Do the animals have religious importance, as suggested by what appear to be ritual objects on some of the seals? If the seals have religious meaning, why would they have been used for commercial purposes, such as marking property for trade? Why are some of the animals realistic and others imaginary? Efforts to answer these questions will be speculative, of course, but not necessarily uninformed. What we know of other ancient cultures and later Hindu beliefs and practices can help guide our hypotheses. But because answers cannot be certain without confirmation from literary or other sources, they must be held tentatively and kept always open to revision.

With this caveat in mind, let us try to elucidate the meaning of these unusual images. To begin, we may reasonably conclude that the images express an intense fascination with, and perhaps anxiety about, sexuality and reproductive functions. That the seals portray only male animals, with their genitals on obvious display, supports this supposition, as does the strong emphasis on the animals' horns and flanks. Still, we must wonder why animals rather than humans are taken as symbols of male sexuality. Perhaps these depictions are associated with the human appropriation of animal powers. Throughout the world, human beings have often sought to incorporate certain qualities they admired in animals. In some cultures, for example, eating the heart of a powerful animal was believed to allow a human to incorporate the animal's courage and strength, which were thought to reside in the heart. The animal images of the Indus Valley seals may represent a symbolic attempt to obtain such powers. By creating and using visual representations of

sexually potent animals, the dwellers of the Indus Valley may have intended to acquire that potency for themselves. Furthermore, it is possible that the animals themselves were regarded as sacred because of their sexual prowess. If so, they may have been worshiped and made the objects of cultic practice. Its frequent appearance in these designs might indicate that the bull was the principal object of veneration.

Further underscoring the Indus Valley culture's captivation with sexuality is the discovery of numerous terra-cotta figurines depicting women with exaggerated hips, full thighs, bare breasts, and elaborate hairstyles. While men seemed somehow insufficient to symbolize male sexuality in this society, the same was not true of women (figure 1.5).

Whether these images signify human women or goddesses (or different manifestations of a single goddess) cannot be ascertained by examining the figurines alone. But two factors support the argument that the images are goddesses. First, the Hindu traditions assumed to have roots in the religion of the Indus Valley do not always make sharp distinctions between the divine and the human domains. The gods and goddesses, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, can assume human forms, and individual human beings can come to be regarded as divine.² Because of the permeability between these two realms, the fact that the figurines appear unremarkably human does not rule out the possibility that they symbolize the divine. Second, similar representations of females from the same time period have been unearthed in many parts of the world (figure 1.6). These comparable figurines are almost certainly symbols of divine females.³

The widespread discovery of such images has led some scholars to theorize the existence of a vast **mother goddess** religion that long



Fig. 1.5 Female figurine from the Indus Valley. Images such as this terra-cotta statuette from the Indus Valley Civilization were perhaps representations of goddesses who were worshiped for their live-giving powers. (Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, N.Y.)

antedated the worship of male gods.⁴ That hypothesis has been controversial and does not enjoy universal acceptance among scholars. But whether or not such a wide-reaching cult ever existed, it is quite likely that the dwellers of the Harappan Civilization venerated a mother goddess. The worship of a divine mother figure has a long, deep-rooted tradition in Hindu history, and thus it is at least plausible that the Indus Valley images are the vestiges of what may be the earliest form of that tradition. Even if the figurines are not goddesses per se, it seems evident that in the Indus Valley culture, the reproductive powers of women were revered and celebrated, and



Fig. 1.6 The Venus of Willendorf. This figurine from Northern Europe is one example of an ancient goddess who some believe may have been at one time the object of worldwide devotion. (Photo courtesy of Creative Commons, Matthias Kabel.)

women themselves were perhaps regarded as sacred.

Sexuality and the Sacred

The intimate connection between sexuality and the sacred may strike some modern persons, particularly those living in the West, as odd. For many today, religion seems more involved in suppressing sexuality rather than encouraging and celebrating it. To understand the correlation of sex and divinity in the ancient world, we must appreciate several things about the way early humans viewed the world and their role in it. First, we must bear in mind

that the reproductive process was the object of awe. How new human beings were produced by the sexual union of males and females was a fundamental mystery. The idea that new life was created by the merger of sperm and egg did not arise until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, little more than two centuries ago. That reproduction was controlled by powers beyond the reach of human beings was for millennia a reasonable assumption. Second, although the ancients thought reproduction was governed by forces greater than themselves, they often believed it was necessary to cooperate with and assist these forces in certain ways. One of the functions of sacrifice, for example, was to provide the gods with the nourishment and raw materials (in the form of meat and blood) they required to produce (or reproduce) life. In this sense, the divine and human realms were dependent on each other.

Third, most ancient peoples believed in the power of what we would call magic. Magic, in this sense, is the process of achieving a desired effect through the use of rituals, words, thoughts, and other technical means. For example, many societies believed ceremonial dancing could induce rain. Because reproduction, both human and animal, was so vital to human survival, it was often made the object of magical practices. The mythologies of some cultures told how the world and its inhabitants were produced by the sexual union of a god and goddess. In such cultures, men and women might perform ritualized sex acts to ensure the fecundity of the land and its people. A magical performance imitating the primordial act of the gods was thought to provoke them to re-create or to harness the same creative and procreative powers in the service of human reproduction. In the Harappan culture, the creation and usage of the soapstone seals and terra-cotta figurines depicting aspects

of sexuality may have been a way of magically petitioning and assisting the divine forces in the crucial matter of continuing life.

Proto-Shiva

Another bit of Harappan archaeology worth our attention is a seal illustrating a person sitting in what appears to be the lotus posture, a fundamental pose in the Hindu practice of yoga and meditation (figure 1.7). This seal raises the intriguing possibility that the earlier dwellers on the Indus—or at least some of them—were practitioners of meditation. If true, then India has had an interior-looking, contemplative spirit throughout its history. There are other tantalizing features to this seal as well. The individual is surrounded by various kinds of animals, including a tiger, an elephant, a rhinoceros, and a bull or buffalo. The seated figure seems to have three faces looking in different directions. For



Fig. 1.7 Pashupati, Lord of the Animals. This soapstone seal from the Indus Valley displays a figure in a posture associated with meditation in the later Hindu traditions. (Photo courtesy of http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shiva_Pashupati.jpg)

Hindus today, multiple faces or heads are an iconographic convention symbolizing divine omniscience. On the figure's head sits a headdress. The sex of the figure is not clear, but some who study this seal believe the figure is male and sporting an erect phallus. As with other artifacts from the Indus Valley, it is not exactly clear who or what this image represents. Many scholars believe this figure may be an early likeness of the god later known as Shiva. They have dubbed this particular seal **Pashupati**, "Lord of the Animals," one of the many titles for Shiva.

Comparing the Indus Valley imprint with a modern image of Shiva helps substantiate the contention that the seal depicts this popular Hindu god. The corresponding modern image is called **Mahayogi**, "Great Meditator" (figure 1.8). Juxtaposing the two images reveals numerous similarities. Both figures assume the lotus position for meditation. Both are surrounded by animals. In the modern image, Shiva wears and sits on a tiger or leopard skin and is accompanied by his animal companion, the bull Nandi. The motif of the horned headdress in the soapstone seal seems to be replicated in the modern Shiva's trident or the horns of Nandi. Although not so represented in the Mahayogi image, Shiva is described in later Hindu texts as having an erect phallus. Yet despite these comparisons, not all scholars are convinced of the argument. Some are not even persuaded that the Indus Valley image is intended to represent a human figure; they see it as a buffalo head attached to a human body. To some it is not evident that the figure has three faces and an erection. These latter features are not associated with Shiva in later Hindu iconography, but the dispute about their appearance in the image illustrates how even experts in the field may come to vastly different conclusions when presented with the same



Fig. 1.8 Shiva as Mahayogi. Some scholars think the modern image of Shiva, the god of ascetics, may be rooted in the iconography of similar figures from the Indus Valley Civilization. (Photo courtesy of Creative Commons, Luna Park.)

artifacts. Again, the evidence leaves us with no definitive conclusion.

A second seal similar to the Pashupati image portrays another figure sitting in the lotus position (see figure 1.4, bottom row, third seal from left). Like Pashupati, this figure appears to have more than one face and to wear a horned headdress, but these features are even less clear than on the Pashupati seal. What is intriguing about the second seal, however, is the tree design that appears to grow out of the headdress. Most scholars agree that the design is a stylized version of the pipal tree. The pipal tree (*ficus religiosa*) is easily recognized by the distinctive shape of its leaves. This motif has been

found on a large number of Indus seals. In some images, people surround the tree, apparently in the act of venerating it. In another, a woman, or perhaps a goddess, appears within the tree (see figure 1.4, top row, third seal from left). In view of the role trees play in later Hindu history, it is reasonable to conclude that Indus Valley dwellers regarded the tree as auspicious and probably sacred. If subsequent Hindu practice can be taken as a guide, the Harappans may have considered the pipal tree to be a home for spirits or the manifestation of a goddess. Interestingly, the pipal is the same tree under which the Buddha sat on the night of his awakening, centuries after the dissolution of the Indus Civilization.

The Absence of Evidence

Perhaps as important as what archaeologists have uncovered around the Indus River is what they have failed to find. The Indus Valley was apparently a relatively peaceful culture, since few real weapons have been discovered; archaeologists have found no traces of spears, swords, or arrows. And as yet, no temple or house of worship that can be positively identified as a sacred precinct has been found. It may be that the central place of worship in this culture was located in the home, as it is for present-day Hindus. In any event, the absence of clearly recognizable temples underscores an important fact of ancient existence in many parts of the world: that the sacred and secular, or the holy and profane, were not sharply distinguished. There was no separate domain of life that could be identified as “religious.”

To conclude our sketch of life in the ancient Indus Valley, let us sum up the conclusions that seem best supported by the evidence currently available. Harappan culture was deeply concerned with procreation and purity. Its citizens

likely worshiped certain male animals, perhaps foremost the bull. Representations of male sexuality may have been the focus of veneration and may have been used magically to enhance fertility. Female powers of reproduction were regarded as sacred and perhaps revered through the symbol of the goddess. Ritual practices and the production of images may have centered on ways to incorporate the sexual powers of animals and divine figures. Purification rites, evidence of meditative practice, and well-organized cities suggest the Indus dwellers placed a premium on order and restraint. To the extent that this is an accurate sketch of Indus culture, it indicates that beliefs and practices were oriented toward the present life here on earth and not toward a life hereafter. There is little in the ruins to indicate that Indus dwellers thought much about an afterlife or even wondered about what might be in store for the individual after death. Ritual practices seem to have been chiefly—if not exclusively—for the purposes of sustaining and renewing life in the here and now. Religious beliefs and practices in this culture served a conservative function: to keep things as they were and to maintain the world by honoring and harnessing its powers and respecting its boundaries. And throughout its history, the Indus society was quite successful in its efforts. Little seems to have changed in this civilization during its life span.

The Demise of the Indus Valley Civilization and the Advent of the Aryans

After the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization, modern scholars were faced with the task of explaining the demise of the great

culture and its relationship with the Indo-Aryans, a people with whom the Hindu traditions had long been associated. The theory that came to prominence in the early twentieth century suggested that the Indus Civilization declined near the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., when bands of light-skinned Aryans ventured into the Indian Subcontinent from Central Asia and conquered the dark-skinned Indus dwellers. Many members of Harappan society were killed off, and the survivors were subjugated and assimilated into the Indo-Aryan culture. This theory was not an unreasonable conclusion, given the **Aryans'** documented love of war and conquest. The idea of such a military invasion and conquest, in fact, informed Adolf Hitler's creation of the myth of Aryan superiority and his appropriation of the **swastika**, an ancient Aryan symbol (figure 1.9).



Fig. 1.9 The swastika. The swastika is an ancient Indian symbol, long antedating its appropriation as a Nazi emblem. Its modern association with Adolf Hitler has not diminished its usage in India. (Photo courtesy of Creative Commons, Vivek Joshi.)

Today, however, most scholars of ancient India think the Aryans' arrival in South Asia was well short of an invasion. The invasion theory is now generally acknowledged as heavily influenced by the ideology of Western colonialism. Other evidence paints a different picture of the Aryan movement into India. We know, for example, that the Indus Civilization was already in serious decline by 1600 B.C.E., when the Aryans supposedly subdued the region by military means. Recent satellite photography has shown that between 1900 and 1600 B.C.E. the Indus River changed course, leaving the region desiccated. Archaeology confirms that cities of the Indus Civilization were being abandoned during this period. Furthermore, there is no evidence, archaeological or otherwise, to suggest a massive Aryan conquest. The Aryans' own extensive writings never mention wars or hostilities against peoples who can be positively identified as indigenous to India. In all likelihood, the Indo-Aryans migrated slowly and relatively peacefully into the Indus region beginning around 1600 B.C.E. and may have coexisted for a time with the remaining citizens of the native culture.

But there is another theory to explain the relationship between the Indus dwellers and the Aryans. According to this idea, the Aryans were actually indigenous to India, not Central Asia, and migrated *from* the subcontinent to other locations throughout the world. This perspective is known as the **Out of India theory**. According to this hypothesis, Aryan culture was actually an outgrowth of the Indus Valley Civilization. An upshot of this theory is that the foundations of the Hindu traditions are wholly the product of Indian culture with no influences from outside sources.

In recent years, the Out of India theory has been revived by Hindu communalists, who seek

to promote Hindu interests and traditions in Indian politics, and by some Indian and Western scholars. Hindu nationalists believe the idea that the Aryans came from anyplace other than India, whether by invasion or even by a milder form of migration, denigrates Hindu and Indian culture. The proponents of the Out of India position use Aryan literature and the absence of archaeological evidence to support their point of view. Because the issues at stake are highly charged in the current political climate of India, the so-called **Aryan question** has now become the subject of great debate. The issue has become as much a matter of politics as of history.

In the next chapter, we will begin our study of Aryan culture and its impact on the development of Hinduism. Our examination adopts the theory that the Aryans began moving rather

peacefully into the subcontinent from Central Asia around 1600 B.C.E. This is the perspective held by most scholars of the history of the Hindu traditions. In the opinion of this scholarly majority, the hypothesis of a relatively quiet migration makes the greatest sense of all the available evidence. But as we have seen in our consideration of the Harappan civilization, the data relating to ancient cultures is often subject to multiple interpretations, and those who study these data must always keep an open mind about the larger significance of what they study. Thus, I present the Aryan migration theory with the understanding that future discoveries and scholarly arguments may require that we revise that position or discard it altogether.⁵ We turn now to explore that hypothesis in greater detail.

◆ KEY TERMS

Aryan question
 Aryans
 Harappa
 Indus Valley Civilization
 Indo-Aryans
 Mahayogi
 Mohenjo-daro
 mother goddess
 Out of India theory
 Pakistan
 Pashupati
 ritual purity and pollution
 sacred
 swastika

◆ QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What is ritual purity and how does it differ from physical hygiene?
2. Which aspects of the Indus Valley Civilization's religious practice may be present in the later Hindu traditions?
3. How did the Indus Valley dwellers depict male and female sexuality?
4. What evidence suggests that the Harappans venerated a mother goddess?
5. What are the possible causes of the Indus Valley Civilization's decline?
6. How have the Harappans' and Indo-Aryans' ambiguous origins been used to support the objectives of modern political movements?

◆ QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Why do you think sexuality—whether it is being restrained or celebrated—is so important in religious practice?
2. What social, political, and religious functions do symbols serve? Can a symbol itself become powerful, apart from the reality it represents? Consider the origin of the swastika and the meaning it attained as an emblem of the Nazi Party.
3. Why is it important to theorize about an ancient culture, even when there is too little evidence to reach definite conclusions? What are the dangers of such theories?

◆ FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Bryant, Edwin. *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Eisler, Riane. *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. New York: Harper, 1988.
- Fairservis, Walter A., Jr. *The Roots of Ancient India*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- Kenoyer, Jonathan Mark. *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Sjöö, Monica, and Barbara Mor. *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*. New York: Harper, 1987.