

Name _____

Date _____

Ancient India

"It Goes Round and Round"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. The world hasn't always looked the way it looks now. Land doesn't stay still but slowly shifts around on tectonic plates. India's plate was once part of Africa, but over millions of years, it slid off Africa, across the sea and slammed up against Asia. In doing this, it created a huge mountain range, the biggest in the world. These are the Himalayas, which is where you can find Mount Everest.

Those massive peaks make a nice wall, cutting India off from the rest of the world. India is a peninsula, jutting down between the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It's surrounded by water on three sides and the Himalayas on the fourth.

Rushing down from the mountains are the Indus and Ganges Rivers, which bring massive volumes of water to the countryside, making for great farming opportunities. For complex reasons, a big wind, called a monsoon, blows north through India every summer for a few months. It brings lots of rain and thunderstorms with it, so summers are the rainy seasons. All these factors give the area a moist, humid climate and lots of thick jungles.

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2. The first people to migrate to the Indus River Valley were hunters who came from Africa, probably around 40,000 BCE. By about 2300 BCE, the large city of Harappa had been built. Harappa was one of the most developed civilizations in the world in its day. It included the city of Harappa and another big urban area, Mohenjo-daro, about 300 miles away on another section of river. Even though they were far apart, the two cities had striking similarities. Both were laid out with grids of paved streets that made right angles. People built houses out of stone, some of which were three or four stories high. Big fortresses stood near each city to provide protection.

The people had weights, measures and a currency, so they could trade. The government may have stored food in case of shortages. They were perhaps the first people to make garments out of cotton. The Harappans used pictographs, drawings and symbols that represented ideas, to write. Both cities had another great invention: sewer systems to carry all human waste out of the city. Almost no other cities had a sewer system at this time. Harappan civilization had all but disappeared by 1700 BCE for reasons that are still unclear.

3. The Aryans were Indo-Europeans who migrated from Central Asia through Iran to the Indus River Valley around 1500 BCE. They were a nomadic and warlike people.

The Aryans rode into town on chariots and horses, which are native to the steppes of Central Asia. By about 800 BCE, they'd made their way to the Ganges River, using weapons of iron to conquer more and more territory. Many of the Aryans settled around the Ganges. They brought their culture and their language, known as Sanskrit, as well as their gods and early Hinduism. They also brought their social hierarchy, known as the caste system.

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4. At first, as in other cultures, there were two classes of people in India: nobles and commoners. Indo-Aryans later added a third category, probably reserved for the darker-skinned people they conquered. But the caste system wasn't really about race. It was about dividing people into classes and making sure everyone stayed where they began.

The caste system was like a social pyramid. At the very top were the Brahmin, who were the leaders and the priests. Only the men in this caste could attend school. On the next level were the Kshatriya, the soldiers. Women couldn't fight, but the wives of soldiers still belonged to this class. Beneath the warriors were the businessmen, tradespeople and farmers — the Vaishya. This caste was able to own land. The next class, Sudra, included the servants, clerks and farmhands. There were huge numbers of these folks. Beneath the Sudra was the group known as the Dalit, or "the untouchables." They were the freemen and women who held the worst jobs in society. They existed below the caste system, and people were not supposed to have any contact with them.

5. The Vedas were ancient Indian texts that became the basis for the Hindu religion. There were four major ones: the Rig-Veda, Sama-Veda, Yajur-Veda and Atharva-Veda. The Rig-Veda is one of the oldest pieces of literature that still exists, dating back to between roughly 1700 and 1100 BCE. It has the earliest mentions of astronomy, astrology and many other metaphysical "sciences." As a group, the Vedas explored the relationship of the human soul to the material world. In them can be found the earliest mentions of yoga, meditation and mantras.

In cultures that believe in god or gods, as nearly all do, there are nearly always people who claim that they alone can speak with their god or interpret the messages of the gods. These people become priests. As the doorway to the gods, they usually become very powerful and often very rich. This is exactly the situation for the Brahmin in India. They interpreted the Vedas and guided the customs of Hinduism.

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6. Hinduism is the world's oldest major religion that is still practiced. A group of diverse beliefs and traditions, Hinduism has no single founder. It is the world's third largest religion, after Christianity and Islam, with approximately one billion adherents, most of whom live in India and Nepal.

Brahman is the unchanging, infinite reality that exists in all matter, energy, time, space, being and everything beyond in this universe. To achieve enlightenment, most Hindus believe that you must realize that you are and always will be made of pure energy—pure Brahman.

Your karma is the energy you create when you do something that is either right or wrong. Doing something wrong, like lying, creates bad karma, while doing something good, like helping someone, creates good karma.

In Hinduism, karma is important because it determines what you will come back as in your next life. Hindus believe in reincarnation, the idea that a person's soul is reborn again and again into different bodies, including animals. You might come back in your next life as a squirrel or a king, but you have to live life right in order to reach enlightenment.

7. Siddhartha was a young, rich Indian prince born in about 560 BCE. He wasn't happy with his life as a Hindu; he sought more answers than he felt Hinduism could offer. One day he left his family and his riches behind and decided that the secret of life was not to be reincarnated over and over but to find enlightenment, the state of being free from suffering.

Siddhartha wandered around India looking for life's answers but not finding any. He stopped and sat under a big, beautiful tree on the Ganges River and meditated. For seven weeks he sat under that tree—until he became enlightened. After that, he was known as the Buddha, or "enlightened one." He spent the rest of his life sharing his ideas with people, founding a whole new religion: Buddhism.

Nirvana is the highest goal of a Buddhist. Some people simply call it enlightenment. Nirvana happens when a Buddhist is finally free of suffering and all worldly problems—he or she has broken the cycle of reincarnation and is in a state of peace.

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8. In 326 BCE, Alexander the Great invaded India and spread his huge empire all the way to the Indus River Valley. But when he returned to Babylon in 324 BCE, an Indian ruler named Chandragupta overthrew a bunch of Alexander's generals in the Punjab area and set up the largest Indian kingdom yet, called the Mauryan Empire. Ashoka was another famous ruler of the Mauryan Empire. He expanded the kingdom of India—but at a terrible cost. They say his battlefield victories were so brutal and bloody that he eventually renounced war altogether. He became a Buddhist and was instrumental in spreading the faith to millions of others across Central Asia.

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