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Date _____

Empires of India

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.

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As the final major emperor of the Maurya Empire, Ashoka ruled over a vast domain that spanned much of the Indian subcontinent. After ascending to the throne in 268 BCE, the young king launched a military campaign to conquer the state of Kalinga, located on the east coast. The war was long and bloody, but ultimately successful for the Mauryans, and Ashoka became renowned for his ruthless conquests.

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Though the Maurya Empire was larger and more powerful than ever before, Ashoka was profoundly unhappy. He was horrified by the destruction that the war had wrought, leading him to renounce violence entirely. Instead, he dedicated himself to spreading Buddhism throughout his domain. Buddhist thought revolves around the concept of dharma, or the seeking of truth and righteousness in order to achieve enlightenment. Ashoka commissioned the construction of massive pillars inscribed with the Buddha's teachings and traveled around the empire to preach the dharma. Today, he is credited as one of the most influential figures in the proliferation of Buddhism across Asia.

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Notes

The Gupta Empire's 200-year reign saw remarkable advancements in the arts and sciences of ancient India. Chief among these achievements was the completion of the Mahabharata, one of two epic poems that is central to Hinduism. Its primary narrative revolves around two branches of a family, both of which claim to be the rightful heirs to the throne of Hastinapur a dispute that culminates in war. One important part of the Mahabharata is its commentary on dharma, or Hindu moral law. The ideals of dharma, including duty, selflessness, and faith, are exemplified throughout the poem in the deeds of certain characters. In many cases, they are shown to be so subtle and conflicting that even the hero cannot always uphold them.

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Though no one knows exactly who wrote the Mahabharata, primary authorship is typically attributed to the Hindu sage Vyasa. It was likely written between 400 BCE and 200 CE, and it's no wonder that it took so long to compose: At 1.8 million words, it's the longest poem ever written. In fact, it's more than 10 times the length of the Odyssey and the Iliad combined!

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Early nomadic groups that settled in the Indian subcontinent more than 3,000 years ago are credited with the writing of the Vedas, a large body of scriptures that form the basis of Hinduism. The Vedas describe how Hindus should pray, perform rituals, and live their day-to-day lives. They also lay out a class hierarchy that dictates occupation, social obligations, and even character traits. Each class, or varna, makes up a part of India's rigid social structure known as the caste system.

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While the caste system has ancient roots, its effects on Indian society continue to this day. According to a 2021 survey by Pew Research Center, segregation by caste remains prevalent throughout the country. A majority of Indians report that most of their friends are of the same caste as them, and even more believe that people should only marry within their caste. Additionally, members of lower castes are generally poorer and have fewer educational opportunities than their higher caste counterparts. Still, there are signs of progress. Most Indians today say that they would accept a neighbor of a lower caste, and many more report that they have not recently experienced discrimination on the basis of caste.

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