***Origin of an Empire***

India had many small kingdoms. India’s princes fought over these kingdoms for years. Then the Persian armies conquered India and made it part of the Persian Empire. More than one hundred years later, Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Empire. He led his army into India, but his soldiers were tired and wanted to go home. Alexander did not want a fight with his soldiers so he and his army left India.

At that time, Chandra Gupta Maurya took over part of the Ganges River valley. After Alexander left, Chandra Gupta took over almost all of northern India.

In 321 B.C., the Mauryan dynasty began. A dynasty is a group of rulers from the same family. Chandra Gupta set up a well-organized government in the capital city of Pataliputra. To keep control, Chandra Gupta also set up a strong army and a good spy system. He made a postal system for fast communication.

Many historians think that the greatest king of the Mauryan Empire was Chandra Gupta’s grandson, Ashoka. Ashoka ruled from about 273 B.C. to 232 B.C. He was a strong military leader who grew to hate war. After one bloody fight, he promised to spend his life making peace. He decided to follow the teachings of Buddha. He built hospitals for people and for animals. He also built new roads with coverings and shade trees so travelers could rest.

Ashoka sent many Buddhists out to teach Buddhism in India and Asia. In India, he had workers carve the Buddha’s teaching on pillars, or large, tall stones. He also had workers build thousands of **stupas**, or Buddhist shrines. Unlike most rulers of the time, Ashoka was tolerant of other religions. He allowed Hindus to remain Hindus.

When there is a good road system and a strong ruler, trade is good. Trade was very good under Ashoka. India became the center of a huge trade network. It stretched all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

Ashoka died in 232 BC. The kings who followed him were not good leaders. The empire grew weak. These kings made many unwise decisions. They forced merchants to pay heavy taxes. They took the peasants’ crops without paying them. The people turned against these rulers. In 183 B.C., the last Mauryan king was killed by one of his own generals. After that the Mauryan Empire split into small warring kingdoms.

***The Gupta Empire***

For the next 500 years, India was not united. Then, a prince from the Ganges River valley rose to power His name was Chandra Gupta, just like the founder of the Mauryan Empire. This Chandra Gupta founded the Gupta dynasty in A.D. 320. He ruled from the old capital city, Pataliputra. When he died, his son Samudra Gupta took over. Samudra Gupta gained new lands for the empire. He also became a patron, or gave money, for people to make art and literature. This brought in a golden age for the Guptas.

Merchants used a network of trade routes to buy and sell. They gained wealth for themselves and the empire. Cities grew along the trade routes and made travel easier.

The Guptas supported Hinduism. They built fine temples and created beautiful works of art to honor the Hindu gods. **Pilgrims**--people who travel to holy places--used the trade routes to get to these popular places. These travelers made the cities rich.

***Culture in Ancient India***

Artists, builders, scientists, and writers were busy under the Mauryan and Gupta Empires. After Sanskrit developed under the Aryans, the Hindu Vedas were written down. Another kind of popular text was the epic poem. These were long poems about the adventures of brave heroes. The most famous epic poems are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana.*

*The Mahabharata* is the longest poem in any language. It was written about 100 B.C. The best-known section of this poem is the **Bhagavad Gita**. The name means “Song of the Lord.” The hero in the poem learns from the god Krishna that he should do his duty and follow his dharma, no matter how difficult it is.

Music was important in the religious and social lives of the ancient Indians. Religious poems, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, were probably sung in group settings. Musical instruments included tambourines, flutes, drums, and lutes(a stringed instrument).

Early Indian art that has survived is mostly religious art made of stone. There are many sculptures of the Buddha. These statues teach different Buddhist messages based on the figure’s pose.

Gupta mathematicians were among the first to think about the idea of infinity. Infinity is the idea that space, time, or an amount of something goes on without ending. They invented the concept as a way to show nothingness by using the number zero. The Indian number symbols for 0 through 9 are the same ones we use today. Arab traders brought these “Arabic numerals” to Europe. By about the A.D. 1200s, Europeans were using these numerals, too.

Indian scientists mapped the movements of the planets and stars. They knew that the Earth was round and that it moved around the sun. Metal workers used steel and iron to make tools and weapons.

Gupta doctors set broken bones and performed operations. They invented medical tools and used herbs to treat illness. Indian doctors thought that it was important to find the cause of a disease. A doctor named *Shushruta* even did plastic surgery.