

# Ancient India

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

To gain perspective on ancient Indian culture, it is important to explore the three main religions of these people. In this lesson, you will learn about:

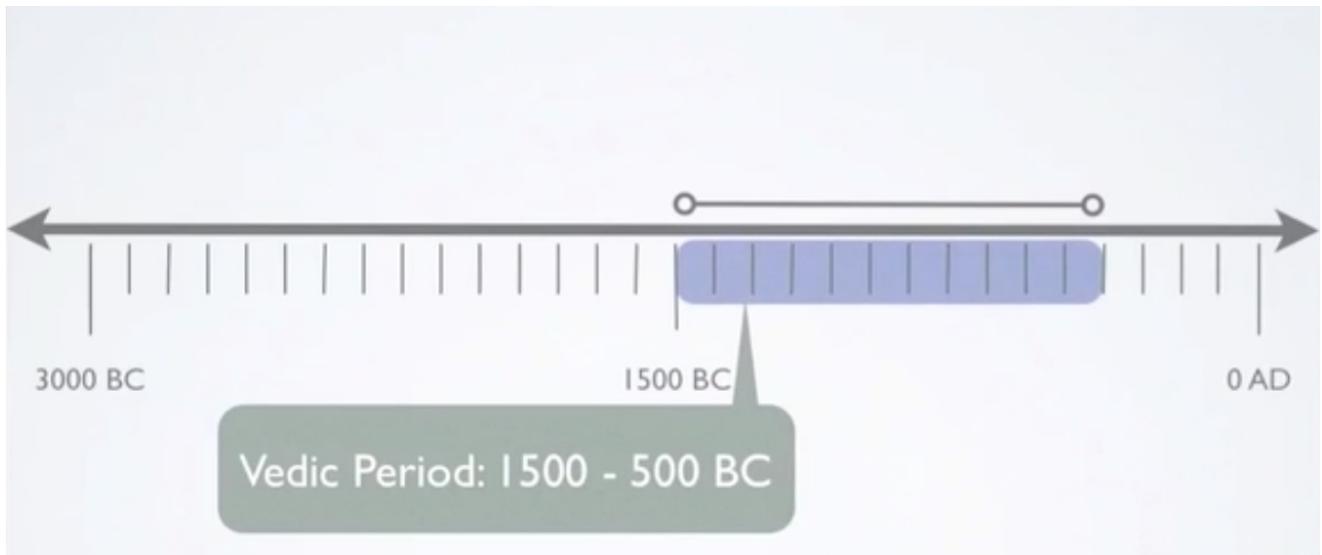


### BIG IDEA

Ancient Indian culture developed around the Indus Valley. The ancient religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism are fundamental to the cultural understanding of Indian civilization.

## 1. Period and Location: Ancient India

The period of time covered in this lesson, from about 1500 BC to 500 BC, is referred to as the Vedic period, highlighted on the timeline below.



The geographical region covered in this lesson is the Indian subcontinent located below the primary continent of Asia. Millions of years ago, the Indian subcontinent moved northward and collided with Asia, creating the Himalayan Mountains.

---

## 2. Hinduism

The best approach to understanding the culture of ancient India is to look at its main religions. **Hinduism** is

just one of these, and it is important for a number of reasons.

Hinduism is considered the oldest continuously practiced religion, reaching back 4,000 years, making it several years older than the next oldest continuously practiced religion, Judaism. Hinduism originated with the development of the **Vedas**, Hindu texts written in the ancient language Sanskrit. There are several tenets that are essential to Hinduism.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The idea of dharma, or duty, is very important in the Hindu religion. Karma, or the action or moral law of cause and effect, is also important.

Samsara are earthly pleasures that lead people to desire to be reborn. This idea of rebirth or reincarnation is fundamental to Hinduism. However, it is believed in this religion that samsara can lead to unhappiness. The path to happiness is achieved through the elimination of the samsara through moksha, an enlightenment later called nirvana. Brahman is a unifying cosmic spirit.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Hinduism**

A system of religious practice in India that emphasizes the idea of dharma, or duty, and corresponding daily rituals and practices

##### **Vedas**

The oldest and most authoritative Hindu texts, written in Sanskrit

---

## 3. Buddhism

**Buddhism** is another important religion to Indian culture. This religion is based on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, who was known as the Buddha or the Enlightened One. Gautama Buddha lived from about 563 BC to 483 BC. During the Mauryan Empire, which occurred from 322 to 185 BC, **Ashoka** was an important Buddhist king of third-century BC India and was influential in promoting the spread of Buddhism.

Buddhism has central tenets as well, which were essentially revealed to the Buddha. The Buddha then went out roaming India to share his discipline with others. One of the central tenets of Buddhism is that life is a journey of self-discovery, with the ultimate goal being to achieve nirvana, or a profound peace of mind. Nirvana is also analogous with enlightenment and the elimination of earthly desires, or suffering, through the path of liberation.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Karma, enlightenment, and the elimination of suffering are fundamental to all of the religions explored in this lesson.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of the Buddha.



Statue of the Buddha



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Buddhism**

A religion based on the teachings of the Buddha, which emphasizes that all suffering in life comes from desire and that the way to achieve nirvana, or enlightenment, and release from the cycle of life is to eliminate one's earthly desires

### **Ashoka**

An important Buddhist king of 3rd century BC India, known for his edicts, posted at the top of monumental pillars

---

## 4. Jainism

The third and final major religion of ancient India is **Jainism**. Jainism, once a major religion in ancient India, originated sometime before the ninth century BC. However, it has since been marginalized to a minor religion, unlike Hinduism, which is still quite a major religion, or Islam, which is practiced by many in modern-day India.

One of the central figures in Jainism is **Mahavira**, who established the central tenets of Jainism. These foundational laws describe what Jainism encompasses. One of these laws is a very forward-thinking idea, pluralism, which is concerned with truth and the relativity of viewpoints. There's not a single perception of truth, but instead, it depends on your point of view.



### DID YOU KNOW

This idea of pluralism is much different than the Christian religion idea that truth is universal. Another thought, or law, has to do with the cosmic spirit or soul that all living things are endowed with, from the lowliest bacteria to human beings. Essentially, souls are inherently pure, and karma attaches itself to a soul.

These religions were integrated within the lives of the people. They were very well-defined and affected all areas of life. It is important to understand the culture of the people that were participants of these religions in order to understand one, or all, of these individual religions.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of Mahavira.



Statue of the Mahavira



**Jainism**

A religion founded in ancient India that teaches the immortality and transmigration of the soul and denies the existence of a perfect or supreme being

**Mahavira**

The man who established the central tenets of Jainism

---

## 5. Examples of Indian Art

There are very few examples of early Indian art predating the Vedic period. In this lesson, we'll explore two examples.

➤ **EXAMPLE** The first example of Indian art is a smaller stone sculpture of the priest-king, located in Mohenjo-Daro from 2000 BC to 1900 BC.



Priest-king from Mohenjo-Daro

2000-1900 BC

Stone



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Interestingly, this sculpture has similarities to artworks explored in previous lessons, including:

- The scroll-like ear on the mask of Agamemnon (Aegean area)

- The stylized beard (Sumerian areas)
- Trefoil-patterned robe

➔ EXAMPLE The next example is a stone-relief carving from 2300 BC to 1750 BC. It is a seal depicting a figure in a yogic position.



Seal with a figure in a yogic posture

2300-1750 BC

Stone

Some interesting features of this example are:

- The horn-shaped hat or crown
- Portrayal of a three-faced figure
- The yogic pose



## DID YOU KNOW

This yogic posture is an important part of the religion of the ancient Indians. It potentially dates back as far as 2300 BC.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Trefoil

A decorative shape with three lobes



## SUMMARY

Religion was extremely important to ancient Indian culture. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of ancient India**.

Three main religions of this region were explored in this lesson, starting with **Hinduism**, which is centered about the ideas of rebirth or reincarnation and the idea that samsara can lead to unhappiness. **Buddhism** is based on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, who was known as the Buddha or the Enlightened One. The third main religion is **Jainism**. One of the central figures in Jainism is Mahavira, who established the central tenets of this faith. These foundational laws describe what Jainism encompasses.

Finally, you explored two **examples of Indian art**. The first example was a sculpture of the priest-king from Mohenjo-Daro. This piece of artwork has similarities to artwork from previous lessons. The second piece of art was the seal with a figure in a yogic position, dated from 2300 BC to 1750 BC.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Buddhism

A religion based on the teachings of Buddha, which emphasizes that all suffering in life comes from desire and that the way to achieve nirvana, or enlightenment and release from the cycle of life is to eliminate one's earthly desires.

### Hinduism

A system of religious practice in India that emphasizes the idea of dharma, or duty, and corresponding daily rituals and practices.

### Jainism

A religion founded in ancient India that teaches the immortality and transmigration of the soul and denies the existence of a perfect or supreme being.

### Mahavira

The man who established the central tenets of Jainism.

### Trefoil

A decorative shape with three lobes.

**Vedas**

The oldest and most authoritative Hindu texts, written in Sanskrit.