

## Ancient India

The earliest complex society in South Asia was the **Indus Valley Civilization** (c. 3300–1300 BCE), a Bronze Age culture centered on the Indus River basin (sites at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in today's Pakistan). It developed advanced urban planning, brick architecture, and trade networks; at its mature phase (c. 2600–1900 BCE) cities covered over 100 hectares and featured standardized pottery and seals <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. The civilization declined after c. 1900 BCE, giving way to smaller farming communities.

By about 1500 BCE, **Indo-Aryan** (Vedic) culture spread into northern India. The Vedas – the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism – date to this period; they were transmitted orally and only committed to writing by about 1000–500 BCE <sup>3</sup>. The early Vedic society was largely pastoral and tribal; by the late Vedic period (c. 1000–500 BCE) it had evolved into settled agriculture, iron use, caste distinctions, and small kingdoms (Mahājanapadas). Religious thought flourished: the **Upanishads**, composed c. 800–500 BCE, introduced ideas of Brahman (ultimate reality) and ātman (self) that underlie later Hindu philosophy.

Simultaneously, new religions arose in India. **Jainism**, founded by Mahāvīra (c.599–527 BCE), and **Buddhism**, founded by Siddhārtha Gautama (the Buddha) in the late 6th century BCE, challenged Vedic ritualism. Both preached nonviolence, asceticism, and liberation from rebirth <sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup>. Buddhism quickly spread throughout India and beyond under royal patronage. By 500 BCE, north India was divided among republics and monarchies (like Magadha in Bihar) and home to major universities (Takṣaśilā, Nālandā).

## Mauryan Empire (c. 321–185 BCE)

In 321 BCE Chandragupta Maurya conquered Magadha (eastern India) and toppled the Nanda dynasty. He founded the **Mauryan Empire**, unifying most of South Asia under one administration <sup>6</sup>. Under Chandragupta (r.321–c.297 BCE) and his advisers (notably Kautilya, author of the Arthaśāstra), the state built a centralized bureaucracy and standing army. Chandragupta's grandson **Āśoka** (r. c.269–232 BCE) further consolidated the empire. After a brutal conquest of Kalinga, Ashoka converted to Buddhism and promoted “dharma” (ethical duty) by royal decree <sup>7</sup>. He erected stone **Edicts of Ashoka** (the earliest Indian inscriptions) teaching nonviolence and welfare. Ashoka sponsored Buddhist councils and missions abroad. His reign is often called a high point of moral statecraft; after his death, however, the Mauryan Empire quickly fragmented by c.185 BCE due to revolts and succession struggles.

## Successor States (c. 200 BCE–300 CE)

After the Mauryas, northern India fractured into many states. In Magadha, the Śuṅga (c.185–73 BCE) and Śāka (c.1st–2nd century CE) dynasties rose. In the northwest, Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings ruled portions of Punjab and Gandhāra, blending Greek and Indian cultures. The **Kushan Empire** (c.30–375 CE) in Gandhāra and northern India (founded by the Yüeh-Chih nomads) dominated trade on the Silk Road and patronized Buddhism. In South India, the **Śatavāhanas** (c.1st century BCE–3rd CE) ruled central India, supporting trade and Buddhism. These centuries saw flourishing trade (including with Rome), growth of city

fairs and ports, and the spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Scholastic Sanskrit culture also matured: Hindu epics and scriptures (Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Purāṇas) were consolidated, and classical literature (Kalidāsa, Kālidāsa's dramas) appeared by the Gupta era.

## Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 CE)

From about 320 CE, **Gupta rulers** established a dynasty based at Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna). This period is often called India's "**Golden Age**." The Guptas held sway over much of northern India through a loose feudal system. Under them, arts, science, and literature flourished: Sanskrit poetry and drama (Kalidāsa), mathematics (the concept of zero and decimal notation by Aryabhaṭṭa), astronomy, and metallurgy advanced. Gupta kings such as Chandra Gupta I and Išvar Gupta I issued gold coins and built temples, as reflected in 5th-century art (Ajantā Caves paintings, Sūrya temples). Hinduism gained prominence – Gupta monarchs were Hindu – but religious tolerance was the norm; both Buddhism and Jainism continued to be practiced and patronized alongside Hindu temples <sup>8</sup>. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang visited India c.630 CE and praised the Gupta realm's wealth and piety. The Guptas' reign brought political stability, supported long-distance trade, and fostered a classical culture that became a foundation for later Indian civilization <sup>9</sup> <sup>8</sup>.

After c.550 CE, the Gupta Empire fragmented under pressure from White Huns invasions and regional rebellions. Northern India entered a period of smaller, regional kingdoms and shifting powers.

## Early Medieval India (c. 600–1200 CE)

The centuries after the Guptas saw numerous regional dynasties. In the north, after a brief reunification under **Harṣa** (r.606–647 CE), who ruled from Kānauj and briefly patronized Buddhism <sup>10</sup>, northern India again split. Multiple kingdoms vied for power: in the east the Pāla Empire (c.750–1174 CE) of Bengal and Bihar was Buddhist; in the west, the Pratihāra dynasty and later Rāṣṭrakūṭa dynasty held sway. In the Deccan and South India, the Chālukya (Cauvery Karnataka) and Pallava (Tamil region) dynasties traded control, while from the 9th to 13th centuries the powerful **Chola Empire** (Tamilakam) dominated South India, Sri Lanka, and parts of Southeast Asia. During this era Bhakti movements arose: saint-poets in Tamil (Nayanars, Āḷvars) and in northern Hindi/Bengali (Kabīr, Nānak) preached devotion to a single God and social equality.

This period also saw the first Muslim incursions into northwestern India. In 712 CE, the Umayyad general Muḥammad bin Qāsim conquered Sindh and Multan (in present-day Pakistan). Although this brought Islamic rule only to Sindh and parts of the Punjab at first, it set the stage for later invasions. By the end of the 10th century, Turkic Ghaznavid and Ghorid raiders (from Central Asia) began to raid the Indo-Gangetic plain; in 1192 CE Muḥammad Ghori defeated the Rajput ruler Prithvirāja III at the Second Battle of Tarain. This paved the way for the establishment of the **Delhi Sultanate** (1206–1526), the first major Muslim empire in northern India <sup>11</sup>.

## Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526)

The Delhi Sultanate was a succession of five Muslim dynasties that ruled from Delhi and some regional capitals. It began with the Mamluk (Slave) dynasty (Qutb al-Dīn Aibak, r.1206–1210) and included the Khalji and Tughluq dynasties, as well as short-lived Sayyid and Lodi houses. The Sultanate expanded its territory across northern India and into Bengal, Gujarat and the Deccan at times. Delhi became a great city with massive architecture: the Quwwat-ul-Islām Mosque (Delhi's first mosque) and the **Qutb Minār** (72.5 m red-sandstone victory tower, the tallest brick minaret in the world) date from this era <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> .

Culturally, the Sultanate synthesized Persian, Turkic, and Indian elements: Persian became the court language, new Islamic institutions (mosques, madrasas, tombs like the Shrine of Nizam al-Mulk) appeared, and Indo-Islamic arts and literature developed. At the same time, Hindus, Jains and Buddhists continued to live under Sultanate rule, sometimes facing higher taxes but often practicing their faiths openly; major Sufi saints (e.g. Nizāmuddīn Auliya, 1238–1325) and Bhakti poets (e.g. Rāmānuja, Kabīr, Nānak) reflected a religious blending in society.

Despite political turmoil and local rebellions, the Delhi Sultanate laid the foundations of Islamic governance and culture in India. By the early 16th century, however, its power waned amid the rise of regional sultanates (e.g. Bengal, Bahmani) and invasions from Central Asia.

## Mughal Empire (1526–1857)

In 1526 the Mughal warlord **Babur** (descended from Timur and Genghis Khan) defeated the Sultan of Delhi at Panipat and founded the Mughal Empire. His grandson **Akbar** (r.1556–1605) extended Mughal rule across most of northern and central India, incorporating Rajput, Sultanate, and Rajah's territories. The Mughal court patronized a syncretic culture: Akbar himself married a Hindu princess, abolished certain non-Muslim taxes, and proclaimed a vision of religious accommodation. Under Akbar and his successors (Jahāngīr, Shāh Jahān), Mughal India became famous for its wealth, architecture and administration. Persian arts flourished, and the empire brought together Hindus and Muslims in government (e.g. Rajput nobles in the army). The **Tāj Mahal** (completed 1653 by Shāh Jahān) exemplifies Mughal art and religious syncretism: this white marble mausoleum, built as a tomb for the emperor's wife, is "the jewel of Muslim art in India" and a universally admired masterpiece <sup>14</sup> .

The Mughal state administered a large agrarian economy with irrigation, trade networks (reaching Persia and Europe), and a land-revenue system (jamāi, assessed by periodic surveys). Classical Urdu language emerged, blending Persian and local dialects. Moghul rule saw flourishing classical music (e.g. Rāga traditions), miniature painting, and literature (Persian epics).

Under **Aurangzeb** (r.1658–1707), the empire reached its greatest territorial extent but also policies that reversed Akbar's inclusiveness. Aurangzeb imposed Islamic law strictly and reintroduced non-Muslim taxes, causing discontent <sup>15</sup> . By his death in 1707, some 7,000 imperial troops had died in his long campaigns <sup>15</sup> , and the empire began to fragment. In the 18th century, regional powers such as the **Marathas** (Hindi: Mārāṭhā) emerged. The Marathas, led by Shivaji (crowned 1674) and his successors, were a Marathi-speaking warrior confederacy based in western India. They expanded through much of the subcontinent during the 18th century <sup>16</sup> , even after Mughal authority declined. The Mughal emperors became

figureheads, and by 1750s real power lay with provincial nawābs, Marathas, Sikhs (in the Punjab), and others.

## European Arrival and Colonial Rule (1498–1947)

The first European to reach India was the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in 1498. Over the next century, Europeans (Portuguese, Dutch, French, Danish, and especially the British) established coastal trading posts. The British **East India Company** (chartered 1600) gradually turned from trade to conquest. In the mid-1700s, the Company won two decisive battles in Bengal: **Plassey (1757)** and **Buxar (1764)**. At Plassey (June 23, 1757), Robert Clive defeated Bengal's nawab with only a few thousand troops; this victory "marked [the Company's] transformation from a mere mercantile presence into a military and political power in India" <sup>17</sup>. By Buxar in 1764, the Company's armies (led by Hector Munro) defeated the combined forces of the Nawab of Awadh, the Nawab of Bengal, and the nominal Mughal Emperor, securing the right to collect land revenues (Diwāni) in Bengal <sup>18</sup>. These events made the Company the paramount power in eastern India and the foundation of colonial rule.

Over the next decades the East India Company annexed or dominated most of India. It founded the Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay, and Madras, and constructed railways, telegraphs, courts, and schools, often reshaping the economy for raw materials. British rule (first company rule, then Crown rule) also brought social reform movements (Sātvah Sārama and others campaigned against sati, child marriage, and caste abuses) and introduced English education. However, heavy taxation, de-industrialization of traditional crafts, and famines (especially in the 19th century) led to hardship for peasants and artisans. Discontent grew among Indian soldiers (sepoys) in the Company's army, culminating in the **Indian Rebellion of 1857**. Sparked by sepoy grievances and wider disaffection, the 1857 revolt was a widespread but ultimately unsuccessful uprising of Indian rulers and soldiers against Company rule. Its suppression led Britain to dissolve the East India Company and place India under direct Crown rule (the **British Raj**). From 1858 onward, India was officially a British colony governed by a Viceroy in Delhi.

Under the British Raj (1858–1947), India saw major changes. Modern infrastructure (railways from 1850s, telegraph, ports) knitted the subcontinent together. English became a lingua franca for administration and education. At the same time, British economic policy often prioritized industrializing Britain over Indian welfare, contributing to periodic famines (e.g. 1876–78, 1899–1900) and dislocation of artisan classes. Socially, British officials outlawed practices like **sati** (widow burning) in 1829 and encouraged Western medicine and science, but also entrenched racial barriers in governance (few Indians held high offices). Intellectual life saw a renaissance: English-educated Indians founded newspapers and societies. Reformist associations like the **Brahmo Samāj** (founded c.1828 in Bengal) and **Arya Samāj** (c.1875) debated religion, caste, and gender reform in Hindu society.

Resentment against racial discrimination and economic control gradually coalesced into Indian nationalism. **Indian National Congress (INC)** was founded on December 28, 1885 in Bombay with 72 members (W.C. Bonnerjee as president) <sup>19</sup>. Initially Congress leaders sought moderate reforms (increased representation, civil rights under the Raj), but by the early 20th century some began demanding self-rule (Swarāj). Key events like the Partition of Bengal (1905, later reversed), the formation of the Muslim League (1906), and World War I radicalized politics. The INC split into moderates and extremists (Tilak, Lajpat Rai, Gokhale). After World War I, **Mahatma Gandhi** (returned from South Africa in 1915) became the paramount leader. Gandhi pioneered mass nonviolent resistance (Satyagraha), organizing campaigns: Noncooperation (1920–

22), Civil Disobedience (Salt March 1930), and Quit India (1942). Congress leaders (Nehru, Patel, Bose, etc.) campaigned for independence; communal tensions (Hindu-Muslim) also grew, exacerbated by some British policies.

In 1947 Britain left India. The subcontinent was partitioned into two independent dominions: **India and Pakistan** (with separate East and West wings). The transfer of power was completed on August 14 in Pakistan and August 15 in India, when the British Raj formally ended <sup>20</sup>. This partition, decided on religious lines, triggered the largest human migration in history: Hindus and Sikhs moving to India, Muslims to Pakistan. Communal violence during partition killed an estimated one to two million people <sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, on August 15, 1947 India became an independent nation.

## Republic of India (1947–Present)

After independence, India adopted a written constitution on November 26, 1949 (coming into force on January 26, 1950) <sup>22</sup>, establishing a **sovereign secular democratic republic**. Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister, advocating socialist-style mixed economy planning, industrialization, and non-alignment in the Cold War. Princely states (hundreds of local monarchies) were integrated into the Union; by 1956 states were reorganized on linguistic lines. The government launched Five-Year Plans to develop agriculture and industry; the **Green Revolution** of the 1960s later boosted food production through new seeds and irrigation.

India's early years saw conflicts with neighbors. Immediately after independence, India and Pakistan fought over Kashmir (1947–48). In 1962, India suffered a humiliating defeat in the **Sino-Indian War** (over Himalayan border disputes); Indian forces lost over 7,000 men before a Chinese ceasefire <sup>23</sup>. India developed its own nuclear capability, conducting its first atomic test at Pokhran on May 18, 1974 <sup>24</sup>.

Domestically, Nehru's era (1947–1964) pursued secularism and democracy. His daughter **Indira Gandhi** (PM 1966–1977, 1980–84) centralized power and introduced socialist policies (bank nationalization, land reforms). Under Indira, India won a decisive **1971 war** against Pakistan – supporting Bengali independence – which led to creation of Bangladesh. Indian troops captured Dhaka after 13 days of fighting, securing Pakistani surrender on Dec 16, 1971 and Bangladesh's independence <sup>25</sup>. Indira also oversaw India's first successful nuclear weapons tests in 1974 and 1998, declared a “nuclear-weapon state.”

The Republic continued evolving: Indira Gandhi imposed a state of Emergency in 1975 (suspending elections and rights), which was lifted in 1977 leading to her electoral defeat. The 1980s saw her return to power, her assassination in 1984, and the ascent of her son **Rajiv Gandhi** (PM 1984–1989), who promoted technology and telecom expansion. The Congress Party dominated politics but faced challenges from regional and opposition parties. In 1991, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh introduced sweeping **economic liberalization** reforms (ending license controls, lowering tariffs, encouraging foreign investment), transforming India into a rapidly growing market economy.

Since 1991, India's economy has grown dramatically (though poverty remains an issue). India is now one of the world's largest economies and democracies. In politics, the 21st century saw coalition governments and a rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which led the government from 1998–2004 under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and again from 2014 under Narendra Modi. Socially and culturally, India remains diverse: it officially recognizes dozens of languages (Hindi and English for federal purposes) and has major religions

(Hinduism ~80%, Islam ~15%, plus Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jains, etc.). Urbanization, education expansion, and a booming IT and space sector (Indian Space Research Organisation's missions) mark recent decades. India plays an increasing global role, including leadership in organizations like the G20 and multilateral initiatives on climate and development.

Through four millennia of history, the Indian subcontinent has continually reshaped its identity. From ancient cities of the Indus through empires of Mauryas, Guptas, Mughals and the modern republic, India's story is one of cultural synthesis and political change. Its dense tapestry of languages, religions, and artistic traditions – from **Hindu temple** carvings and **Buddhist stupas** to **Mughal monuments** and **colonial architecture** – reflects the country's layered past. Today's India draws on this heritage while charting rapid social and economic change, holding to democratic ideals and pluralism even amid great diversity.

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