

Ancient India: The Classical Age

500 BCE to 500 CE

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Introduction

This Premium TimeMaps unit on Classical India is a sequence of maps offering an overview of the history of the Indian subcontinent between 500 BCE and 500 CE.

The sequence can be clicked through to gain a panoramic view of this area of world history.

Aims

The unit's aim is to quickly and clearly show the main episodes in the history of the Indian subcontinent in the Classical Period (500 BCE to 500 CE). It does not include the Indus Valley civilization. Nor does it include the long period of Aryan migration into and across northern India which followed. Both these episodes are covered in the Timemaps Premium unit *Early Civilizations*.

Students should finish using this unit with a rounded overview of Classical Indian history. For example, they should that,

- In the centuries leading up to 500 BCE great changes were affecting India;
- This was resulting in the rise of new religious movements, notably Jainism and Buddhism;
- Alexander the Great invaded India, an event which left an enduring legacy in Indian history and culture;
- A great empire, the Mauryan empire, rose and fell over a period of a century and a half;
- There followed several centuries when India was divided into many states, but that economic, religious and cultural developments continued;
- That during these centuries Buddhism spread to other parts of the world;
- And that classical Indian civilization reached its peak at a time when a second great empire, the Gupta empire, dominated northern India.

How to use the Timemap

This Timemap is a supplementary resource that can be slotted in whenever the teacher thinks fit. It is ideal for use as an introduction to this era of world history.

The unit can be used as

1. a whole-class presentation, and/or
2. the basis for student-based activities.

For more, see below.

Section 1: Whole-class presentation

Using a projector/whiteboard system, you can show the map sequence to your class, talking through each map.

To help you do this, we have prepared accompanying Presentation Notes, which you can use as a script or an *aide-memoire*.

This activity could be used as a stand-alone exercise; or as an introduction to this period of world history; or as a wrap up/reinforcement exercise.

For each map, these notes mostly follow the same formula:

1. *Date and introduction*

The date to which the map refers, followed by a small introductory paragraph which seeks to encapsulate in a sentence or two what's going on in the map. These are in **bold**.

2. *Bullet points*

One or more bullet points, giving very brief points of interest in the map, or in the period it covers.

3. *Additional notes*

These give more in-depth support to the bullet points.

Much of the information they contain may be superfluous to your needs, especially if you are covering a topic quickly. However, we have included it so that it is there for you if you want it. We suggest that, prior to using the Presentation with your class, you go through these additional notes and highlight any you wish to use.

Some key words or phrases are in **bold**; these are often referencing points covered in the AP World History document, but they are also there to help you see at a glance the key points in a paragraph.

The Presentation commentary notes are followed by a short **quiz**.

A suggestion:

To keep your students more engaged (and, by the way, if your students are not engaged or benefitting from these maps, then let us know and we'll refund your money!), why not start each new map with a question: *How is this map different from the previous one?*

Another question for some maps might be, *What happens next, do you think?*

Presentation Notes

If using these in class it might be helpful to print these notes out.

500 BCE: Northern India is experiencing large-scale changes at this time.

Quick Points:

- Northwest India was the location of the Indus Valley civilization, one of the earliest civilizations in world history. This has long since vanished (note 1).
- Since then, the Aryans, a warlike people originally from central Asia, have spread across the northern part of the Indian subcontinent (note 2).
- The Aryan religion is an early form of Hinduism (note 3).
- In Northern India, the warlike Aryan tribes are now forming organized states. City-based civilization is returning to the region, and new belief-systems are being developed (note 4).
- Central and southern India are home to hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and farmers (note 5).

Additional Notes:

1. The Indus Valley civilization

The Indus Valley civilization flourished between about 2700 to 1800 BCE (see the Premium Unit *Early Civilizations*).

After that time, it vanished. Modern scholars do not understand the reasons for this great civilization's collapse. It may have been linked to an immigration of peoples from central Asia.

2. The Aryans

These immigrants were a branch of the **Indo-European** speaking peoples. They were originally **nomads** who herded flocks of sheep and cattle across the steppes north of the Black Sea. They then spread out: west into Europe (where they divided into such peoples as the Greeks, Italians and Celts), south into the Middle East (where their descendants included the Hittites and Kassites), and southeast into Iran and Afghanistan (where they became the Persians and other Iranian tribes - see the Premium Unit *The Ancient Middle East*).

From Iran and Afghanistan, some of them moved into the northwest of the Indian subcontinent. Here they called themselves **Aryans** (which means "noble ones"). They spoke a language called **Sanskrit**, which is closely related to Greek, Latin and other Indo-European languages.

The Aryans were divided into many clan groups, each under its own chieftain. Soon these began fanning out across the plains of northern India. A warlike people, they conquered the inhabitants of the farming villagers of the region; their chiefs became the princes of numerous tribal states.

The different clans were constantly at war with one another. By this date, however, they have been brought under the authority of more powerful rulers. These govern a number of large states, which cover northern India.

3. Early Hinduism

The Aryans follow a religion which is an early form of Hinduism. Modern scholars often call it **Brahminism**. It was led by a class of priests called *Brahmins*. It is only they who are allowed to conduct animal sacrifices to the gods. These form the central focus of Aryan worship.

The Brahmins composed large collections of poems, hymns, rituals and so on, called the **Vedas**. As the Aryans did not yet have writing, the Vedas were passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. They will be written down some centuries after this time, to become the most sacred of the Hindu scriptures. The best-known is the **Rigveda**.

This religion is **polytheistic** (the worship of many gods and goddesses). It has the same roots as the other religions of ancient Indo-European speakers such as the Persians, Greeks, Celts and Germans.

It has developed very specific features of its own, however. At its core is the idea of **karma**. This is the balance of right or wrong deeds a person does in their life.

According to this belief, how one lives in this life will determine one's fate in the next - in particular, whether one would be born into a higher or a lower level of existence.

Karma is thus linked to a belief in **reincarnation**, which holds that the soul passes from one body to another through many lives.

Castes

The ideas of karma and reincarnation have led the Aryans to impose a **caste** system on the peoples they conquer. They divide society into different hereditary groups (castes, or *varnas*). From the top these groups are:

- **Brahmins** - priests
- **Kshatriyas** - warriors
- **Vaishyas** - farmers, craftsmen and traders
- **Shudras** - labourers and servants.

Outside the caste system are the **outcastes**. These are not true members of Aryan society, and are not really regarded as being fully human. They undertake all the filthy and degrading tasks which a society needs doing, such as the collection of refuse and handling of dead bodies.

There is evidence that at first these castes were like social **classes** in other societies - groups of different levels of status, wealth and power, but whose members were able to move from one to another. Gradually, however, caste divisions became much stricter. Members of one caste were not allowed to marry someone from another caste, or even mix socially with them.

4. A changing society

Over the last few centuries, **iron**-using technology has spread to the Indian subcontinent from the Middle East. This has helped farmers settle the **Ganges** plain in large numbers, turning thick forests and swamps into excellent **farmland**. This in turn is raising levels of **population**.

More recently, **trade** links have grown up between northern India and the great civilizations of the Middle East. Along with trade has come **writing**. The Sanskrit **alphabet** has recently been developed, and is based on the Aramaic alphabet commonly used in the Middle East.

The expansion of trade is leading to the rise of **towns**. Urban (town-based) social groups are appearing in Aryan society - merchants and craftsmen. These do not fit in easily with the old social divisions.

The Aryan tribes have been evolving into **states**, with governments and armies. Most of these are **kingdoms**, ruled by hereditary monarchs. Some, however, are ruled by groups of nobles. Some modern scholars describe these states as **republics**.

5. Central and southern India

These regions are covered by mountains, forests and deserts. They are home to non-Aryan peoples. Some of these groups are **hunter-gatherers**, some are **pastoralists** and some are **farmers**. They live in small settlements - farming villages or temporary encampments - and there are no towns and cities here. Literacy is also absent, and iron tools are only now beginning to replace Stone Age ones.

400 BCE: This period sees the rise of new religions in India - Buddhism and Jainism.

Quick Points:

- The changes in Aryan society are creating a great deal of religious unease (note 1).
- As a result, two new teachings have emerged, Buddhism and Jainism (note 2).
- The most successful of the Aryan states is the kingdom of Magadha (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. Religious unease

The big changes in Aryan society are causing many people to feel dissatisfied with traditional Aryan religion. The rise of towns is creating new social groups, such as merchants and artisans. These people can read and write, and have time to think about other things than just surviving. They may also have been influenced by ideas coming in from outside the Indian subcontinent, especially the Middle East.

Many of these want a new kind of belief system, which is not just to do with sacrifices to the gods. They yearn for deeper explanations of spiritual things, and about how humans can lead better and happier lives.

Some Brahmins are trying to make the ancient Vedic belief system more relevant to the times. They develop ideas which explain the relationship between the gods, humanity and the universe. These are written down in a collection of commentaries on the Vedas called the **Upanishads**.

At about this time, the Vedas themselves begin to be written down in Sanskrit.

2. New belief-systems: Jainism and Buddhism.

Many people, however, begin to follow teachers who call for a more radical break with the past. As a result, new religious movements are appearing. Two of these will endure down to the present day, and one will grow into one of the great religions of the world.

Both challenge the Brahmin's monopoly on religious leadership; they reject the practice of animal sacrifice, and oppose the caste system.

Jainism

Jainism was founded by a teachers known as Mahavira (c. 540-468 BCE), who taught non-violence against all living creatures, along with the renunciation of physical pleasures and worldly ambitions.

Buddhism

Buddhism was first preached by **Siddhārtha Gautama** (c. 563-483 BCE), a prince of one of the northern Aryan states. He became known as "the Buddha". He taught his followers not to pursue wealth, status or power. Instead, he said, they are to live lives of simplicity and compassion, treating all people and animals with kindness. If they do this, they will move towards **Nirvana**, the liberation from the cycle of rebirths into a state of complete peace.

The founders of both Buddhism and Jainism collected a group of **disciples** around them to pass on their teaching to future generations. Most of these disciples came either from the warrior class or from the new urban groups.

Jainism would remain mostly confined to India, but Buddhism would eventually spread right around Asia, and is today finding many followers in the West.

3. The Kingdom of Magadha

The kingdom of **Magadha** is located in the south-eastern Ganges plain. Its kings have been favourable to both Buddhism and Jainism.

It has been expanding its borders at the expense of some of its neighbours, and will eventually grow into the first great empire of Indian history.

323 BCE: Alexander the Great invades northern India.

Quick points

- A great leader from Europe, Alexander the Great, has conquered the whole of the Persian empire and invaded the Indian subcontinent (note 1).
- The kingdom of Magadha has been expanding, and now forms a large state under the Nanda dynasty (note 2).

Additional notes:

1. Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great was the young king of Macedonia, a kingdom far to the west of India, just north of **Greece**. His father had made himself the master of all Greece, and Alexander inherited that position. He then led a large army of Macedonians and Greeks in conquering the huge **Persian empire**.

After completing this conquest, he invaded India in 327 BCE. He marched further and further into the subcontinent, finally crossing the river **Indus**. Having done so, however, his army mutinied at being so far from home, and forced him to turn back.

The north-western parts of the sub-continent (more or less today's Pakistan) has been incorporated into Alexander's empire.

This is an event of far-reaching importance for India. Alexander's conquests have introduced **Greek culture** into the Indian subcontinent. This will later have a big influence on Indian art and architecture.

2. The kingdom of Maghada

The kingdom of Magadha has expanded by conquering many of its neighbours. It now covers most of the Ganges plain.

It is now ruled by kings of the Nanda dynasty. Besides pushing out the kingdom's borders dramatically, they have gathered power more firmly into their own hands. **Royal officials** take over tasks, such as collecting taxes and raising troops, which were previously carried out by the nobles. The Nanda kings also create a **secret service** to keep themselves informed of plots against them, and of the mood amongst the people.

297 BCE: The Mauryan empire now covers all northern India.

Quick points

- After Alexander the Great's early death in 323 BCE, his empire immediately broke up into several powerful kingdoms (note 1).
- In the kingdom of Magadha, a man called Chandragupta Maurya has seized the throne, and expands the borders to cover all of northern India (note 2).

Additional notes:

1. Alexander's successors

In the years after Alexander's early and unexpected death, his generals divided up his empire among themselves. One of these, **Seleucus**, gained control of the eastern parts of Alexander's empire. These included the Indian provinces. He thus founded the powerful **Seleucid empire**.

2. Chandragupta Maurya

Chandragupta Maurya seized the throne of **Magadha** from the last Nanda king and founded one of India's greatest dynasties, the **Maurya**.

Building on the foundations laid by the Nanda, Chandragupta centralized Magadha's government further. He appointed capable ministers and officials to serve him. He enlarged his army, which included many war elephants. He also followed the Nanda kings in gathered as much information as he could by using an efficient spy network.

Chandragupta's conquests

Chandragupta also continued the Nanda policy of expanding the empire. He brought more and more Indian states under his control, and then, in 303 BCE, he defeated the Seleucid kingdom. As a result, the Seleucids abandoned all their Indian territories to him. He thus gained control of the whole of northern India.

According to tradition, Chandragupta decided to become a Jainist monk in 301 BCE. However, his son has continued to conquer new territories.

232 BCE: The huge Mauryan empire now covers much of the subcontinent.

Quick points

- The Maurya empire has expanded further. It is now ruled by one of the most extraordinary figures in world history, the Buddhist king Asoka (note 1).
- Under the Maurya, central India is being incorporated into Aryan culture (note 2).
- An Indo-Greek kingdom has appeared in Bactria (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Maurya empire

By 268 BCE the Mauryan empire has conquered most of **central India**.

In that year the throne passed to one of the most remarkable figures in Indian history, **Asoka** (reigned 268-232 BCE).

In 261 BCE, Asoka completed the conquest of new territories in eastern India. In the course of these conquests, tens of thousands of people had lost their lives or their homes. Disgusted by the appalling suffering he had caused, Asoka renounced warfare and became a devout Buddhist. He set about governing his vast empire in a compassionate, humane way.

He set up stone pillars (the **Asoka Pillars**) throughout the length and breadth of his empire, urging his subjects to live good lives. He sponsored **missionary** expeditions to spread Buddhism to neighbouring countries. Probably the most successful of these was to the island of **Sri Lanka**, which would eventually become a mostly Buddhist country.

2. Central India

The Maurya founded **new cities** in central India, and built a network of **roads** across their empire. As well as allowing them to control the empire more easily, these roads also encouraged **trade**. Asoka ordered trees to be planted beside them to give shade to travellers, and had inns built where they could rest and refresh themselves.

3. The Indo-Greek kingdom of Bactria

While the Mauryan empire has been expanding and flourishing, in north-west India a part of the **Seleucid empire** has broken away to form the independent kingdom of **Bactria**.

This kingdom is ruled by kings of Greek descent, who encourage the spread of **Greek culture** in the areas under their control. However, they also feel the effects of Indian civilization. For example, some of these kings become Buddhists. In fact, Bactrian culture will become a fusion of Greek and Indian influences. For example, statues of the Buddha show him wearing Greek-style cloaks.

30 BCE: The Mauryan empire has vanished, and India is divided into many states, some large, many small.

Quick notes:

- After Asoka's death in 232 BCE, the Mauryan empire went into decline (note 1).
- A nomadic group from central Asia, the Scythians (known in Indian history as the Saka), have conquered a huge part of northern India (note 2).
- In central India, the powerful and wealthy Satavahana empire encourages Aryan culture to spread southwards through the Indian subcontinent (note 3).

Additional Notes:

1. The decline and fall of the Mauryan empire

After Asoka's death in 232 BCE, a succession of weak kings seem to have ruled. They were unable to hold such a huge empire together. More and more of its territories broke away to form independent kingdoms.

Finally, in 185 BCE, the last Mauryan ruler was assassinated by one of his own generals while inspecting his army. This man went on to found a new dynasty, the **Shunga**; but by now the empire was much smaller than it had been under Asoka.

By this date numerous Indian kingdoms had appeared, and even some republics. But the absence of a strong state has allowed invaders to occupy a large area of the subcontinent.

2. The Scythians

The Indo-Greek kingdom of **Bactria** (see previous map) greatly expanded its territory, but then broke up into a number of smaller kingdoms. The **Scythians**, nomads from the grasslands of central Asia, were then able to conquer deep into the subcontinent.

Invasion from the northwest would be a process often repeated throughout Indian history.

Gandhara art

The Indo-Greeks tended to lean towards **Buddhism**. The Scythians - or **Saka**, as they are known in Indian history - have followed their example.

The patronage of first the Indo-Greeks and then the Saka is creating a unique Indian-Greek-Persian culture in the northwest. Historians call this the **Gandhara culture**.

One particular feature, imported from Greek art, is the depiction of the human form, in statues of the Buddha.

Gandhara art will have a huge influence on later Indian art. Its influence will also be felt in Persia, and even China.

3. Central and Southern India

The **Satavahana** kingdom dominates central India after the fall of the Maurya.

Aryan civilization (or Indian civilization, as we shall now call it) had spread here even before the Mauryan empire conquered this region, and Sanskrit writing, Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism are all now well-established here.

The Satavahana kings are generally Hindu by religion, but they also patronise Buddhism (like many Indian kings at this time). This can be seen clearly in the **cave-temples** they carve out of rock, some of which are Buddhist and some Hindu.

These temples are decorated with many colourful paintings. Only tiny fragments have survived, but these give us our clearest idea of what **Indian art** was like at this time.

The Satavahana kingdom is growing wealthy through long-distance trade across the **Indian Ocean** with the Middle East and the Mediterranean lands.

Indian civilization is now beginning to spread south towards the tip of India. Growing trade contacts with **South East Asia** is bringing new wealth to the far south. Towns and cities are appearing, and literacy and urban lifestyles are taking root. Hindu, Buddhist and Jain **missionaries** are all setting up monasteries and winning **converts**. Centralised **kingdoms** are emerging in place of the old tribal societies.

4. Developments within Hinduism

Early Hinduism (Brahminism) is gradually evolving into modern Hinduism.

The leading gods in the Vedas were Indra, Agni and Soma. These are now receding into the background. In their place, other gods are coming to the fore, above all **Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva**.

These gods (particularly Vishnu and Shiva) have their own followers, drawn from all levels of society. They are worshiped in a much more emotional way than the old Vedic rituals allowed. These new cults therefore meet people's needs for a more personal and spiritual religion.

These developments allow Hinduism to compete effectively with Buddhism and Jainism for converts. They are rapidly growing in popularity.

150 CE: The Saka empire has been replaced with the Kushana empire as the dominant power in Northern India.

- The Kushana are another people from central Asia who have created a powerful empire in northern India (note 1).
- This empire is a stronghold of Buddhism, sending missionaries along the Silk Road to both East and West (note 2).
- Sometime in these centuries, two great Hindu epics are produced, some of the greatest works in world literature (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Kushana empire

Another nomadic group from the steppes of central Asia, led by the the **Kushana** royal clan, invaded the Saka empire in the early 1st century CE. Once again foreign rulers conquered deep into India.

The Saka were confined to western India, just a fraction of their former empire.

2. Buddhism

The Kushana empire stretches from central India up into central Asia, where it straddles the great trade route called the **Silk Road**. This connects China to the Middle East and Europe.

As the Kushana empire is a major centre of Buddhism, along this route travel not only merchants but Buddhist missionaries. They will take Buddhism to **China**, and from there it will spread to **Japan, Korea** and other **East Asian** countries.

To the West, small Buddhist communities form in the **Middle East**. They will last until the conversion of that region to Islam.

Two schools of Buddhism

By this date, Buddhism has split into two branches. The **Theravada** school sticks closely to the original teachings of the Buddha. **Mahayana** Buddhism introduces new ideas. For example, it teaches that semi-divine figures called **Bodhisattvas** can help humans on their quest for salvation (Nirvana).

The Buddhism which the Kushana follow is **Mahayana** Buddhism, and it is this form which spreads to distant lands.

3. Two great Hindu epics

At some time between the 2nd century BCE and the 4th century CE, two great Hindu **epics** are composed: the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Both are massive works (the Mahabharata is the longer of the two at almost 100,000 verses). They are amongst the greatest works of world literature.

The **Mahabharata** deals with the conflict between two royal clans, but it also contains many sections in which religious teachings are explored. The most famous of these is the **Bhagavad-Gita** (the "Song of the Lord"), which looks at the tensions between being a responsible ruler and being a good human being.

The **Ramayana** was about a prince named Rama, who was the god Vishnu in human form. The poem uses his life and deeds to portray ideals in human relationships - father-child, husband-wife, servant-master, king-subjects and so on.

Both epics were written in Sanskrit. By this time most Indians speak many different languages, but Sanskrit remains the language of literature and scholarship.

Another work written in Sanskrit at some point is the **Panchatantra**. This is a book of stories written to teach lessons. Over the centuries it has been translated into many other languages, including English (in the 16th century) and other European languages. Throughout the world as a whole, it is the most popular of all Indian works.

380 CE: The Gupta empire now dominates northern India.

- Under the Gupta dynasty, the kingdom of Magadha has again expanded to become a major empire (note 1).
- The Gupta empire, like other large kingdoms in ancient India, is essentially a confederation of kingdoms under the overlordship of a single great monarch (note 2).
- The Gupta period is the high point of classical Indian civilization, a time of unsurpassed achievement in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature and sculpture (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Gupta dynasty

The Kushana empire disintegrated in the early 3rd century CE, and the long-lasting kingdom of Satavahana, in central India, also vanished. This cleared the way for the rise of a new power in India: the Gupta empire. This would dominate northern India for two centuries.

The Gupta dynasty came to power in the kingdom of Magadha in the late 3rd century. This was the very kingdom which had expanded to become the Maurya empire in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. However, there is thought to have been no direct link between the Maurya and Gupta families.

The Gupta dynasty has seen a succession of able and warlike kings conquer a huge area of northern India. For a short time the brilliant generalship of Samudra Gupta (reigned 330-375) also forced the kingdoms of eastern India to acknowledge him as their overlord. The Gupta empire, however, has been unable to establish firm rule here.

The Vatakatas

One factor aiding Gupta power is the close alliance between the Gupta royal family and the Vatakata royal family. The Vatakatas have risen to control a large part of central India, and strong marriage ties bind the two dynasties together.

2. A confederation of kingdoms

The Gupta empire, like other large kingdoms in ancient India, consists of a **central core** ruled directly by the emperor and his officials. This is probably administered in a way similar to the Mauryan empire, six centuries before - through governors ruling provinces in the name of the emperor.

This core is surrounded by a large number of **tributary kingdoms** whose rulers owe duty to the Gupta emperor as their overlord.

These subordinate kings remain loyal while a strong king sits unchallenged on the Gupta throne. When one emperor dies, however, and a new, untested one comes to the throne, these kings have a tendency to try and break away from Gupta rule.

Fortunately for the Gupta, until the mid-5th century their emperors are equal to the challenge of imposing their authority (except in the case of eastern India, which successfully broke away from Gupta rule at the end of Samudra Gupta's reign - see above).

3. The High point of classical Indian civilization

The Gupta period in India marks the high point of classical Indian civilization. Several important advances are either made, or their existence is first recorded, at this time.

Mathematics and science

Indian **mathematicians** develop the concept of **zero, the decimal system** and so-called “**Arabic numerals**”.

Astronomers work out that the world is a **sphere** and that it rotates round **the sun**, a thousand years before European astronomers do.

In **medicine**, a great medical textbook is written. This includes instructions on how to make medicines from a huge range of plants and minerals, and shows that Indian doctors knew the merits and methods of **inoculation**. They also advanced **surgery** to a higher level than elsewhere in the world, including what we now call plastic surgery.

In **metalwork**, Indian craftsmen produce very tough and pure iron. Under the Gupta dynasty, metalworkers build the famous **Iron Pillar** near Delhi. This is still a major tourists attraction, and has proved remarkably resistant to rust.

Culture

The Gupta kings are Hindu by religion, but they support art and architecture which serves all three major religions of the subcontinent, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. They build Buddhist temples, for example at **Nalanda**, which would become one of the greatest centres of Buddhist studies.

They also build Hindu temples. In fact the Gupta period sees a revolution in Hindu temple design. Apart from the great cave-temples of central India, these have previously been small, square one-room stone structures with flat roofs. In the Gupta period, they grow far larger, and gain huge, highly decorated towers. The decorations are carvings of gods, goddesses and other spiritual beings.

This gives free reign to sculptors, and Classical Indian sculpture is brought to its finest beauty at this time. The influences from Gandhara art are very apparent, with figures finely carved in the round and full of expression and movement.

In literature, the playwright **Kalidisa** brings classical Indian **literature** to its highest peak. He is regarded in much the same light in Indian literature as Shakespeare is viewed in English literature

500 CE: The Gupta empire is now in decline

- From the mid-5th century on, a fearsome people from the central Asia steppes, the White Huns, raid deep into Gupta territory (note 1).
- The classical Indian civilization which has come to a height under the Gupta is badly affected (note 2).
- By now the Gupta empire is in steep decline (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The White Huns

Since the mid-5th century, troubles have multiplied for the Gupta empire. A fearsome people from the central Asia steppes, the **White Huns**, based themselves in north-west India, and from there launched attack after attack, deep into Gupta territory. They were beaten back only with difficulty.

2. Civilization damaged

In these fierce raids, **trade** was disrupted and many **cities** sacked. Many **temples** and **monasteries** were destroyed. Major **centres of learning** vanished - the Huns particularly targeted Buddhist centres, and permanently weakened the religion in the subcontinent.

3. The decline of the Gupta empire

Meeting this threat drained the Gupta treasury. It also encouraged **subordinate kings**, previously loyal to their Gupta overlords, to take matters into their own hands. They defended their territory, and established their independence, from both the Huns *and* the Gupta.

By the end of the 6th century, the empire was clearly in decline. Gupta “emperors” sit on the throne for a further half century, and then, almost unnoticed, disappear from history.

After the Presentation:

The questions in the Presentation notes will work just as well if used as a reinforcement exercise at the end of the Presentation, or indeed as student-based tasks.

Here is a quick **Quiz**:

The answers are given in *(Italics)*.

1. What were the people called who entered and spread across northern India in the millennium before 500 BCE? (*Aryans*)
2. What was the collection of hymns, poems etc which these people composed and transmitted by word of mouth before they were written down to form the sacred scriptures of Hinduism?
3. What broad social groups was classical Indian society divided into? (*Castes*)
4. Name one of the religions which was founded in India in c. 500 BCE? (*Buddhism or Jainism*)
5. Who invaded northwest India in the late 4th century BCE? (*Alexander the Great - Macedonians and Greeks would also do*)
6. Which kingdom expanded to become the Mauryan empire? (*Magadha*)
7. Which of the Mauryan rulers is widely considered one of the most remarkable figures in history? (*Asoka*)
8. How did Greek rulers establish themselves as rulers in northwest India?
9. From which region of the Eurasia did the Saka (Scythians) and Kushana originally come? (*Central Asia*)
10. The Kushana empire was a major missionary centre of which religion? (*Buddhism*)
11. What was the name of the great trade route which crossed central Asia, along which missionaries travelled to other regions? (*The Silk Road*)
12. Gandhara art as a fusion of Indian, Persian and which styles? (*Greek*)
13. Trade across which ocean boosted the wealth of central and south India? (*Indian Ocean*)
14. Which kingdom expanded to become the Gupta empire? (*Maghada*)
15. Which major mathematical discovery occurred in India at around the time of the Gupta empire? (*Zero, the decimal system*)
16. What people from central Asia helped to undermine the power of the Gupta rulers? (*White Huns*)

Class discussion

You might like to hold a class discussion at the end of the presentation.

What were the outstanding events and episodes in Indian history during these centuries?

What were the long-term trends?

What were the most important achievements?

Section 2: Student-based enquiry work

The students can tackle these tasks either as individuals or in small groups. They will obviously need to have access to this Premium TimeMap unit.

They can present their answers in essay form or as presentations.

The questions are designed to stimulate enquiry, thought and discussion.

Short exercises

Fill in the blanks

1. The people who migrated into the Indian subcontinent after the fall of the Indus Valley civilization are called the
2. The are the priests and topmost caste in Hindu society.
3. According to Hindu teaching, when a living being dies and its soul is reborn in another body, this is called
4. The kingdom of was to grow into the first great empire in Indian history.
5. was the founder of the Maurya empire.
6. The famous Mauryan emperor converted to Buddhism and began to promote Buddhist values among his subjects.
7. Buddhism was spread along the great trade route known as the Road to China.
8. Trade across the Ocean contributed to the wealth of central and southern India.
9. Samadragupta was a brilliant military commander who expanded the empire in 4th century CE India.

2. Multiple choice questions

1. The focus of early Hindu worship was A. animal sacrifice, B. fasting, C. being compassionate to others, or D. refraining from eating meat.
2. The Upanashads were produced by A. Buddhist, B. Early Hindu, c. Jain, or d. Muslim writers.
3. A 4th century BCE invader into northwest India is known to history as A. Attila the Hun, B. Asoka, C. Alexander the Great, or D. Chandragupta.
4. The first great empire to cover most of the Indian subcontinent is the A. Seleucid empire, B. the Gupta empire, C. The Kushana empire, or D. the Maurya empire.
5. At about the time this empire was flourishing, the northwest of India came under the rule of foreigners. These were A. The Persians, B. The Greeks, C. The Scythians, or D. The Romans.
6. Buddhist missionaries were sent to take their faith to China along the Silk Road under the A. Mauryan dynasty, B. the Scythian dynasty, C. The Kushana dynasty, or D. The Gupta dynasty.
7. Mathematics, medicine and astronomy reached their highest achievement in classical Indian history under the A. Mauryan empire, B. Gupta empire, C. Kushana empire, or D. Saka empire.

Critical Thinking

Students tackle one or more of these questions by giving short answers.

1. Why do historians consider the Indus Valley civilization a “civilization”, but not the Aryan culture?
2. What is a caste system? How does the notion of karma reinforce the system?
3. What were the factors which led to the rise of both Jainism and Buddhism in the 5th century BCE?
4. What were the results (both short-term and long-term) of Alexander the Great’s invasion of India for the subcontinent?
5. List the reasons for 1) the rise and 2) the fall of either the Mauryan empire OR the Gupta empire.
6. During the period covered by this unit, in what ways did Hinduism evolve as a belief system - and why?
7. How would you describe the role of central Asia in ancient Indian history?

Extended exercises

Choose one or more of these exercises to do.

Exercise 1.

Students go through the sequence of maps, and, carefully reading the information, answer the questions below.

They then use their answers as the structure in preparing an essay or presentation about the history they have covered.

1. What were the people called who entered and spread across northern India in the millennium before 500 BCE? (*Aryans*)
2. Where did they come from? (*Central Asia*)
3. What language did they speak? (*Sanskrit*)
4. To which family of languages did this belong? (*Indo-European*)
5. What was the collection of hymns, poems etc which these people composed and transmitted by word of mouth before they were written down to form the sacred scriptures of Hinduism? (*Vedas*)
6. What is the best know of these collections? (*The Rig Veda*)
7. The religion these people followed was an early form of Hinduism. What is another name for it? (*Brahminism*)
8. What do we call the hereditary social groups into which Indian society was divided into at this time? (*Castes*)
9. The Indus Valley civilization was located in the plain of the river Indus; what was the great river plain on which Indian civilization re-emerged in the centuries before 500 BCE? (*The Ganges*)
10. In the 6th and 5th centuries, Brahmins started writing reflections about their religious teachings - what were these called?
11. By what title is Siddhārtha Gautama also known as? (*The Buddha*)
12. What was the name of the foreign king who invaded northwest India in the late 4th century BCE? (*Alexander the Great*)
13. Which kingdom expanded to become the Mauryan empire? (*Magadha*)

14. Who was the founder of the Mauryan empire? (*Chandragupta*)
15. Which of the Mauryan rulers is widely considered one of the most remarkable figures in history? (*Asoka*)
16. After the fall of the Mauryan empire what powerful kingdom emerged in central India? (*Satavahana*)
17. This kingdom is famous for particular kinds of temple - what was distinctive about these? (*They were cave-temples, carved out of rock*)
18. Trade across which ocean boosted the wealth of central and south India? (*Indian Ocean*)
19. From which region of Eurasia did the Saka (Scythians) and Kushana originally come? (*Central Asia*)
20. The Kushana empire was a major missionary centre of which religion (*Buddhism - or Mayana Buddhism*)
21. What was the name of the great trade route which crossed central Asia, along which missionaries travelled to other regions? (*The Silk Road*)
22. Gandhara art as a fusion of Indian, Persian and which styles? (*Greek*)
23. What were the two great epics of Sanskrit literature, composed sometime by the Gupta period?
24. Which kingdom expanded to become the Gupta empire? (*Maghada*)
25. Which major mathematical discovery occurred in India at around the time of the Gupta empire? (*Zero, the decimal system*)
26. What people from central Asia helped to undermine the power of the Gupta rulers? (*White Huns*)

Exercise 2. (This is a challenging exercise, perhaps for more able students.)

Look at the maps in the unit Classical India, and read the information attached to each. As you do this, take notes, focussing on the issues below. Note when and where events happened; why they happened; and what changes as a result of them happening.

Belief systems: old beliefs, new beliefs, evolution of beliefs.

Culture: key developments in art, architecture, literature; causes of changes in these.

Government: rise and fall of important states, especially the Maurya and Gupta empires - why did they rise? Why did they fall?

Economy and society: causes behind the expansion or shrinkage of trade, and its impact on society, religion and culture

Then answer the following question:

Through all the ups and downs of the different kingdoms and empires, what were the long-term trends in Indian history during these centuries?

Exercise 3.

In what ways was Indian society being transformed in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE? What were the factors causing these changes?

Exercise 4.

Did other civilizations have any impact on classical India? If so, what was this impact - and how was this influence brought to the region?

AND/OR

Did Classical Indian civilization have any impact on other regions of the world? If so, in what ways?

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: TimeMaps articles for further reading

A list of all TimeMaps articles for Period 2 can be found on the Encyclopedia home page. Here is a selected list of the key articles which students should find most helpful.

[Ancient India](#) - an overview of Indian civilization in ancient times

[Classical India](#) - a survey of Indian history from c. 700 BCE to 400 BCE

[The Mauryan Empire](#) - a survey of the rise and fall of this great empire, c. 400 BCE to 100 BCE

[Gandharan India](#) - a look at the rise and influence of the Indo-Greek culture of northwest India

[The Deccan Empires](#) - covers the most powerful states of central India, both in the ancient and medieval periods