

HA01 — Ancient India

HA01 · AFCAT General Awareness — History

★ Moderate Yield — 1–2 Questions

Every AFCAT aspirant who joins the Indian Air Force becomes part of an institution that protects a civilisation over 5,000 years old. Ancient India is where that civilisation begins — with one of the world's earliest urban cultures, a rich body of philosophy and science, and the religious movements that still shape India today. For the exam, questions here are direct and factual: which site had what feature, which empire achieved what, and which philosopher taught which idea. Think of this chapter as building your "civilisation vocabulary" — the references that appear throughout AFCAT General Awareness.

➔ **AFCAT Focus:** Great Bath = Mohenjo-Daro; dockyard = Lothal; ploughed field = Kalibangan; Indus script = undeciphered; Ashoka = Kalinga War (261 BCE) → Buddhist; Arthashastra = Chanakya (Kautilya); Samudragupta = "Napoleon of India"; Fa-Hien = Chandragupta II's reign (NOT Harsha); Aryabhata = zero + Earth rotates; Kalidasa = Shakuntala. These exact facts are repeated across AFCAT papers.

PART 1 — INDUS VALLEY CIVILISATION

1. The First Urban Civilisation

Around 2500 BCE — when most of the world was still in the stone age — the Indus Valley people were building planned cities with brick-lined streets, two-storey houses, private bathrooms, and covered sewage drains. This was not primitive; it was remarkably sophisticated. AFCAT tests the specific *feature* associated with each site — get these associations locked in.

MAJOR INDUS VALLEY SITES — WHAT MAKES EACH UNIQUE



MOHENJO-DARO (SINDH,



HARAPPA (PUNJAB, PAKISTAN)

PAKISTAN)

- ▶ Means "**Mound of the Dead**"
- ▶ Most excavated; largest population centre
- ▶ **Great Bath** – ritual purification tank; 12×7 m; lined with bitumen
- ▶ Assembly Hall, Granary, College all discovered here
- ▶ Famous artefact: Bronze "**Dancing Girl**" figurine

- ▶ First site discovered (1921) – gave the civilisation its name
- ▶ Large **granaries** – evidence of surplus grain economy
- ▶ Working floors (threshing floors) near granaries
- ▶ RH-33 cemetery found here
- ▶ Fired bricks of standard ratio 1:2:4

LOTHAL (GUJARAT, INDIA)

- ▶ India's most important Indus site
- ▶ Only site with a **dockyard / port**
- ▶ Evidence of maritime trade with Mesopotamia (Persian Gulf)
- ▶ Bead-making factory; fire altars found
- ▶ First evidence of double burial (male + female)

KALIBANGAN (RAJASTHAN, INDIA)

- ▶ Means "**Black Bangles**"
- ▶ **Earliest ploughed field** in the world (evidence of farming)
- ▶ Fire altars discovered – ritual fire practices
- ▶ Both pre-Harappan and Harappan layers found

DHOLAVIRA (GUJARAT, INDIA)

- ▶ Largest Indus Valley site entirely in India
- ▶ Unique three-part layout: Citadel, Middle Town, Lower Town
- ▶ Elaborate water management system – reservoirs and channels
- ▶ Largest Harappan inscription ever found

KEY CIVILISATION FEATURES

- ▶ Grid-plan streets (east-west + north-south); right angles
- ▶ Covered drainage system – most advanced in ancient world
- ▶ **Script: undeciphered** (~400 symbols; right to left)
- ▶ No horse depicted; no temples or palaces identified
- ▶ Trade with Mesopotamia: Indus seals found in Ur

- ▶ Earliest cotton cultivation in the world

PART 2 – VEDIC PERIOD & RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

2. The Vedic Age

After the Indus Valley Civilisation declined (~1500 BCE), the Vedic culture emerged in the northwest. The Vedic period is divided into two very different phases – early and later – and AFCAT tests the ability to tell them apart. The key is: Early Vedic = more equal, cattle-based, Punjab region. Later Vedic = rigid caste, agricultural, Gangetic plains.

EARLY VEDIC VS LATER VEDIC – KEY CONTRASTS

Early (Rigvedic) Period – 1500–1000 BCE

- ▶ **Region:** Saptasindhu – Land of Seven Rivers (Punjab)
- ▶ Semi-nomadic; cattle = primary wealth
- ▶ Relatively egalitarian; women attended sabhas
- ▶ Varna system existed but based on *occupation*, not birth
- ▶ Main gods: Indra (war/rain), Agni (fire), Varuna (cosmic order)
- ▶ Only ONE Veda: **Rig Veda** – 1,028 hymns; oldest Veda
- ▶ No large temples; simple fire rituals

Later Vedic Period – 1000–600 BCE

- ▶ **Region:** Gangetic plains (Doab – Ganga-Yamuna)
- ▶ Settled agriculture; iron tools cleared forests
- ▶ Caste became *hereditary* and rigid (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra)
- ▶ Women lost rights; excluded from sabhas
- ▶ Three more Vedas: **Sama, Yajur, Atharva**
- ▶ **Upanishads:** Philosophical texts; Brahman (universe) and Atman (soul)

- ▶ Brahminical dominance; elaborate yajnas (sacrifices)

Vedic Literature Quick Guide (AFCAT tests "which text does what"):

- **Rig Veda:** Hymns to gods; oldest Veda; "Satyameva Jayate" from Mundaka Upanishad
- **Sama Veda:** Melodies and chants for rituals
- **Yajur Veda:** Ritual procedures and prose formulas
- **Atharva Veda:** Spells, charms, folk magic — most secular
- **Upanishads:** Philosophical discussions; basis of Vedanta philosophy
- **Epics:** Ramayana (Valmiki) and Mahabharata (Vyasa) — Bhagavad Gita is part of Mahabharata

3. Buddhism and Jainism — The 6th Century

Reformers

By 600 BCE, the rigid Vedic caste system and expensive rituals had generated a powerful backlash. Two movements emerged — Buddhism and Jainism — that rejected Vedic authority and offered spiritual paths open to everyone, regardless of caste. Both were founded by members of the Kshatriya (warrior) class, not Brahmins. Both were born in the same region (Gangetic plains) at roughly the same time.

BUDDHA AND MAHAVIRA — THE ESSENTIAL COMPARISON

▲ Gautam Buddha — Buddhism

- ▶ **Born:** Lumbini (Nepal), 563 BCE; Shakya clan; born as Siddhartha Gautama
- ▶ **Enlightenment:** Bodh Gaya (under Peepal / Bodhi tree)

△ Mahavira — Jainism

- ▶ **Born:** Vaishali (Bihar), 599 BCE; Licchavi clan; born as Vardhamana
- ▶ 24th and last **Tirthankara**; first Tirthankara = Rishabhanatha

- ▶ **First Sermon:** Sarnath, Deer Park ("Turning the Wheel of Dharma")
- ▶ **Death (Parinirvana):** Kushinagar, 483 BCE
- ▶ **Core Teaching — Middle Path:** Neither extreme luxury nor extreme asceticism
- ▶ **Four Noble Truths:** (1) Life is suffering; (2) Desire is the cause; (3) End desire = end suffering; (4) The Eightfold Path leads out
- ▶ **Eightfold Path:** Right View, Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, Concentration
- ▶ Rejected caste; open to all; women admitted to the Sangha

- ▶ **Title "Mahavira"** = Great Hero; "Jina" = Conqueror → Jainism
- ▶ **Enlightenment:** At Jrimbhikagrama (east of Vaishali)
- ▶ **Five Vows (Pancha Mahavrata):**
 1. **Ahimsa** (non-violence — most important)
 2. **Satya** (truth); 3. **Asteya** (non-stealing)
 4. **Brahmacharya** (celibacy); 5. **Aparigraha** (non-possession)
- ▶ Extreme asceticism; two sects: Digambara (nude) and Shvetambara (white-robed)

PART 3 — MAURYAN EMPIRE

4. The Mauryan Empire — India's First Unified State

The Mauryan Empire (322–185 BCE) was the largest political unit in Indian history until the British Raj. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya with the strategic genius of Chanakya, it stretched from Afghanistan to Bengal. But it is most celebrated for its third ruler — Ashoka — whose dramatic personal transformation after the bloody Kalinga War became one of history's most remarkable stories of a ruler choosing conscience over conquest.

THREE GREAT MAURYAN RULERS — THE STORY ARC

Chandragupta Maurya (322–297 BCE) Founded the empire after overthrowing the Nanda dynasty. Guided by **Chanakya (Kautilya)**, who wrote the **Arthashastra** — one of the world's first texts on statecraft, economics, and diplomacy. Defeated Greek general Seleucus Nicator (Alexander's successor) and married his daughter. Later abdicated, became Jain monk, died fasting at Shravanabelagola.

Bindusara (297–272 BCE) Expanded empire southward into the Deccan. Called "Amitraghata" (slayer of enemies) by Greeks. Maintained diplomatic contacts with Greek rulers (requested wine and dried figs from Antiochus I). Father of Ashoka.

Ashoka the Great (268–232 BCE) **Kalinga War (261 BCE):** Won but horrified by ~100,000 deaths. Converted to Buddhism; issued **Rock and Pillar Edicts** spreading his Dhamma policy of non-violence, compassion, and welfare. Sent son **Mahinda to Sri Lanka** — spread Buddhism across Asia. The **Lion Capital from Sarnath** = India's national emblem. The wheel on it = Ashoka Chakra on India's flag.

PART 4 — GUPTA GOLDEN AGE

5. The Gupta Empire — India's Golden Age (320–550 CE)

While the Mauryans are known for political power, the Guptas are celebrated for cultural brilliance. This was the period when Indian science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, and art all flourished simultaneously — making India the intellectual centre of the ancient world. AFCAT loves testing Gupta-era achievements because they're specific, factual, and fascinating.

KEY GUPTA RULERS

- ▶ **Chandragupta I:**
Founded empire

SCIENCE & MATHEMATICS

LITERATURE & MEDICINE

proper (320 CE);
Gupta Era begins

- ▶ **Samudragupta (335–375 CE):** "Napoleon of India" (V.A. Smith); great military conqueror; also a poet and veena player; conquests described in Allahabad Pillar Inscription by poet Harishena
- ▶ **Chandragupta II "Vikramaditya" (375–415 CE):** Golden Age peak; defeated Shakas; Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien visited and praised prosperity; court had Navaratnas (Nine Gems)

- ▶ **Aryabhata (Aryabhatiya, 499 CE):** Concept of zero; calculated Pi ($\pi \approx 3.1416$); proved **Earth rotates on its axis**; calculated Earth's circumference; calculated solar year at 365 days
- ▶ **Brahmagupta:** Rules for operations with zero; negative numbers
- ▶ **Varahamihira (Panchasiddhantika):** Astronomy and meteorology
- ▶ Decimal system and place value notation developed in India

- ▶ **Kalidasa:** Greatest Sanskrit poet; works: **Shakuntala** (play), **Meghaduta**, Raghuvamsha, Kumarasambhava; called "Shakespeare of India"
- ▶ **Charaka (Charaka Samhita):** Ayurveda and medicine; 8 branches
- ▶ **Sushruta (Sushruta Samhita):** Surgery; 300+ surgical procedures; "Father of Surgery"
- ▶ **Nalanda University:** Greatest Buddhist learning centre; students from China, Korea, SE Asia

ART & ARCHITECTURE

- ▶ **Ajanta Caves (Maharashtra):** Buddhist paintings; Bodhisattva Padmapani is finest; Gupta-era paintings are most celebrated
- ▶ **Dashavatara Temple (Deogarh):** Early Panchayatana temple; ten avatars of Vishnu
- ▶ **Iron Pillar of Delhi:** Gupta period; remarkable rust-free iron; still stands in Qutb complex

► **Chola Bronzes:**

Nataraja (Shiva as cosmic dancer) — later period but often tested alongside Gupta culture



AFCAT PYQs — Ancient India

Q1. The Great Bath, a famous structure of the Indus Valley Civilisation, was found at: AFCAT PYQ

- (a) Harappa (b) Lothal (c) Mohenjo-Daro (d) Dholavira

✓ Answer: (c) Mohenjo-Daro

The **Great Bath** is one of the most iconic structures of the ancient world — a large public tank (~12 × 7 metres, 2.4 metres deep) at **Mohenjo-Daro**. It was lined with kiln-fired bricks and made watertight with natural bitumen (tar). Scholars believe it was used for ritual purification — perhaps a precursor to the sacred tank tradition still found in Hindu temples. Quick site associations: Lothal = dockyard; Kalibangan = ploughed field; Harappa = granaries; Dholavira = three-part layout.

Q2. The Arthashastra — a treatise on statecraft — was authored by:

AFCAT PYQ

- (a) Kalidasa (b) Aryabhata (c) Kautilya (Chanakya) (d) Patanjali

✓ Answer: (c) Kautilya (Chanakya)

The **Arthashastra** was written by **Kautilya** — also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta — the brilliant minister and kingmaker behind Chandragupta Maurya. It covers statecraft, economics, military strategy, diplomacy, espionage, and governance in remarkable detail. Rediscovered in 1905 (over 1,500 years after it was written). It's one of the world's earliest works of political science — comparable to Machiavelli's "The Prince" written 1,800 years later. Aryabhata = mathematics/astronomy; Kalidasa = Sanskrit literature and poetry.

Q3. Who gave Buddha his first sermon after enlightenment?

AFCAT PYQ

- (a) He gave it to himself in meditation

(b) He gave his first sermon at Sarnath to his five former disciples

(c) He gave it at Bodh Gaya to the monks (d) He gave it at Lumbini to his family

✓ Answer: (b) Sarnath to five former disciples

After enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, Gautam Buddha travelled to **Sarnath** (Deer Park, near Varanasi) where he gave his first sermon to five former companions — this event is called *Dhammachakkapavattana* (Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion). The five became his first disciples. This event is one of the most sacred in Buddhism. Key locations: **Lumbini** = birth; **Bodh Gaya** = enlightenment; **Sarnath** = first sermon; **Kushinagar** = death (Parinirvana). AFCAT tests all four locations.

Q4. Aryabhata's most significant mathematical contribution was:

AFCAT PYQ

(a) Calculation of the area of a triangle (b) The concept of zero and place value

(c) Discovery of negative numbers (d) Invention of algebra

✓ Answer: (b) The concept of zero and place value

Aryabhata (499 CE, Gupta period) is credited with the concept of **zero** and the decimal place value system — arguably the most important mathematical innovation in human history, without which modern science and computing would be impossible. He also calculated Pi ($\pi \approx 3.1416$), proved Earth rotates on its axis (not the Sun moving), and calculated Earth's circumference. His work *Aryabhatiya* was so influential it was translated into Arabic and later into Latin, profoundly shaping European science through the Middle Ages.

Q5. The title "Napoleon of India" was given by historian V.A. Smith to:

AFCAT PYQ

(a) Chandragupta Maurya (b) Ashoka (c) Samudragupta (d) Chandragupta II

✓ Answer: (c) Samudragupta

Samudragupta (335–375 CE) earned the title "Napoleon of India" from historian V.A. Smith because of his extraordinary military campaigns across nearly the entire Indian subcontinent — detailed in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription by his court poet Harishena. Like Napoleon, he was both a great general and a cultured person (poet and musician who played the veena). His policy: annex northern kingdoms outright; accept submission and tribute from southern kings without absorbing them. This combination of military genius and cultural sophistication defines the "Napoleon" comparison.

Q6. The most important of Mahavira's Five Vows is: ⚡ **Tricky**

- (a) Satya (Truth) (b) Asteya (Non-stealing) (c) Ahimsa (Non-violence)
(d) Aparigraha (Non-possession)

✓ **Answer: (c) Ahimsa (Non-violence)**

Ahimsa (non-violence) is the cornerstone of Jainism – the most important of Mahavira's Five Vows. Jains take this to extraordinary lengths: sweeping the path before walking to avoid harming insects, wearing face masks to prevent accidentally inhaling tiny creatures, and avoiding root vegetables (harvesting damages entire organisms). This emphasis on Ahimsa profoundly influenced Mahatma Gandhi, who made it the philosophical foundation of the entire independence movement. The connection between Jain Ahimsa and Indian political philosophy is a significant historical thread.

🧠 Quick Memory Chart – HAO1

🏠 Indus Valley Sites

- ♦ Mohenjo-Daro: **Great Bath**; "Mound of Dead"
- ♦ Lothal: **Dockyard** (maritime trade)
- ♦ Kalibangan: **Ploughed field** (oldest evidence)
- ♦ Harappa: **Granaries**; first site discovered 1921
- ♦ Dholavira: Largest in India; water system

🕉 Buddha & Mahavira

- ♦ Buddha: born Lumbini; enlightened Bodh Gaya
- ♦ First sermon: Sarnath; died Kushinagar
- ♦ Four Noble Truths + Eightfold Path (Middle Path)
- ♦ Mahavira: 24th Tirthankara; Five Vows
- ♦ Ahimsa = most important Jain vow

🌟 Empires

- ♦ Chanakya: wrote Arthashastra; made Chandragupta
- ♦ Ashoka: Kalinga 261 BCE → Buddhism
- ♦ Samudragupta: "Napoleon of India"
- ♦ Chandragupta II: Golden Age; Fa-Hien visited
- ♦ Aryabhata: zero; Earth rotates; Pi; Kalidasa: Shakuntala



Practice Exercise

E1. The Indus Valley Civilisation's script is notable for being:

- (a) Identical to Brahmi; fully understood
- (b) Undeciphered; written right to left
- (c) A form of Cuneiform from Mesopotamia
- (d) Written on palm leaves; lost to history

E2. "Satyameva Jayate" (Truth alone triumphs) – India's national motto – is taken from:

- (a) Rig Veda
- (b) Bhagavad Gita
- (c) Mundaka Upanishad
- (d) Arthashastra

E3. Which Chinese pilgrim visited India during the reign of Harshavardhana (NOT Chandragupta II)?

- (a) Fa-Hien
- (b) Xuanzang (Hieun Tsang)
- (c) I-Tsing
- (d) Marco Polo

Answers:

E1 → (b) Undeciphered; right to left [~400 symbols; no bilingual text found to help decode it; greatest unsolved mystery in Indian history] | E2 → (c) Mundaka Upanishad [adopted as India's national motto on 26 January 1950; also appears on India's emblem beneath the Lion Capital] | E3 → (b) Xuanzang [Fa-Hien = Chandragupta II; Xuanzang (Hieun Tsang) = Harshavardhana – this is AFCAT's most common confusion in ancient history]

Building into medieval India: *Chapter HA02 picks up where HA01 ends – with the arrival of Turkic-Afghan rulers and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. You'll see that many threads from ancient India continue: Buddhism declined partly due to Mughal-era disruption; Bhakti saints responded to the social tensions of the Sultanate period; and the Maratha Empire that eventually challenged the Mughals drew on the warrior traditions you met in the Kshatriya culture of the Vedic age.*



Mock Tests



Subject Quiz



Telegram

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