

HNo1 — Ancient India: Indus Valley, Vedic Age & Religious Movements

📖 HNo1 · NDA General Ability Test — History

★ High Yield — 4–5 Questions

History begins with civilisation — and India's civilisation is among the oldest on Earth. This chapter covers the three foundational periods of ancient India: the Indus Valley Civilisation (2500–1500 BCE), the Vedic Age (1500–600 BCE), and the revolutionary religious movements of the 6th century BCE. Understanding these three periods in sequence — how each emerged, what it contributed, and why it changed — gives you the framework to answer NDA questions confidently. Think of this chapter as laying the ancient foundation on which all later Indian history is built.

📖 **NDA Focus:** Indus Valley script = undeciphered; Lothal = port/dockyard; Mohenjo-Daro = "Mound of the Dead"; Four Noble Truths + Eightfold Path = Buddha's teachings; Mahavira's Five Vows = Jain ethics; First Buddhist Council = Rajgir (soon after Buddha's death); Upanishads = philosophical texts of Later Vedic period; Rig Veda = oldest Veda. These exact facts repeat in NDA papers.

PART 1 — INDUS VALLEY CIVILISATION (2500–1500 BCE)

1. The First Great Urban Civilisation

The Indus Valley Civilisation (also called the Harappan Civilisation) was one of the world's four great ancient civilisations, alongside Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. It was a **Bronze Age urban culture** — meaning its people had moved beyond stone tools, lived in planned cities, and conducted long-distance trade. What makes it remarkable is its sophistication: cities with grid-plan streets, sophisticated drainage, standardised weights and measures, and a writing system — all developed around 2500 BCE.


MAJOR INDUS VALLEY SITES — LOCATION AND KEY FEATURE

 **HARAPPA**
(PUNJAB, PAKISTAN)

- ▶ First site discovered (1921); gave the civilisation its name
- ▶ Granaries — for storing grain (suggests surplus economy)
- ▶ Working floors near granaries show organised labour
- ▶ RH33 cemetery found here

 **MOHENJO-DARO**
(SINDH, PAKISTAN)

- ▶ Name means "Mound of the Dead"
- ▶ Largest site; most excavated
- ▶ **Great Bath** — large public bathing tank; possibly used for ritual purposes
- ▶ Assembly Hall, Granary, College; brick-lined streets

 **LOTHAL**
(GUJARAT, INDIA)

- ▶ Only site with a dockyard/port — evidence of maritime trade
- ▶ Bead-making factory; evidence of fire altars
- ▶ First evidence of double burial (male + female)
- ▶ Trade connections: Persian Gulf, Mesopotamia

 **DHOLAVIRA**
(GUJARAT, INDIA)

- ▶ Largest site in India (Lothal is port; Dholavira is largest)
- ▶ Unique — divided into three parts: Citadel, Middle Town, Lower Town
- ▶ Elaborate water conservation system (reservoirs)
- ▶ Largest Harappan inscription found here

 **KALIBANGAN**
(RAJASTHAN, INDIA)

- ▶ Means "Black Bangles" in Hindi
- ▶ Evidence of **ploughed field** — earliest evidence of ploughing in the world
- ▶ Fire altars found — evidence of ritual practices
- ▶ Unique — both pre-Harappan and Harappan levels found

 **RAKHIGARHI**
(HARYANA, INDIA)

- ▶ Largest Harappan site in India (larger than even Mohenjo-Daro)
- ▶ Recent DNA studies of skeletal remains sparked major academic debate
- ▶ Evidence of diverse craft production

Town Planning & Architecture

- ▶ **Grid-plan layout:** Streets cut at right angles (east-west and north-south)
- ▶ Cities divided into two parts: raised Citadel (upper town, for rulers/priests) and Lower Town (residential)
- ▶ Burnt bricks of standard size (1:2:4 ratio) – uniformity across sites
- ▶ **Drainage system:** covered drains running below streets – most advanced of ancient world; connected house drains to main drains
- ▶ Multi-storey houses with wells, bathrooms, and ventilation
- ▶ No palace or temple identified – suggests no god-kings

Economy, Trade & Decline

- ▶ **Agriculture:** Wheat, barley, cotton (earliest known cotton cultivation in the world)
- ▶ Standardised weights and measures – bronze scale pans, cubical weights
- ▶ **Trade with Mesopotamia** (modern Iraq) – Indus seals found in Ur and Lagash
- ▶ **Script:** still **undeciphered** (~400+ symbols; written right to left and alternating – "boustrophedon")
- ▶ **Animals:** Humped bull, elephant; no horse depicted
- ▶ **Theories of decline:** Flooding, drought, Aryan invasion (largely discredited), ecological degradation


PART 2 – VEDIC AGE (1500–600 BCE)

2. The Vedic Period

After the decline of the Indus Valley Civilisation, a new cultural tradition emerged – the Vedic culture, named after the sacred texts called **Vedas**. The Vedic period is divided into two distinct phases, each with different characteristics. Understanding the difference between early and later Vedic society is directly tested in NDA.

EARLY VEDIC VS LATER VEDIC PERIOD – KEY DIFFERENCES

 **Early (Rigvedic) Period
(1500–1000 BCE)**

 **Later Vedic Period (1000–
600 BCE)**

- ▶ **Region:** Saptasindhu (land of seven rivers — Punjab and Haryana)
- ▶ Primarily pastoral and semi-nomadic; cattle-rearing was central (wealth measured in cattle)
- ▶ **Society:** Relatively egalitarian; women participated in sabhas; women could choose husbands (swayamvara)
- ▶ Varna system not rigidly hereditary — based on occupation, not birth
- ▶ Rivers worshipped: Sindhu, Saraswati most important
- ▶ Gods: Indra (rain, war), Agni (fire), Varuna (cosmic order), Soma
- ▶ Only ONE Veda: **Rig Veda** (1028 hymns; oldest Veda)

- ▶ **Region:** Gangetic plains (Doab region — between Ganga and Yamuna)
- ▶ Settled agriculture; iron tools used — cleared forests for farming
- ▶ **Society:** Varna system became hereditary and rigid; women lost rights (not allowed in sabhas)
- ▶ Caste system hardened: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra
- ▶ Three more Vedas added: **Sama Veda** (melodies), **Yajur Veda** (rituals), **Atharva Veda** (spells/charms)
- ▶ **Upanishads (Vedanta):** philosophical texts; discuss Brahman (universe) and Atman (soul)
- ▶ Brahminical dominance increased; elaborate sacrifices (Yajnas) became important

Vedic Literature — What Each Text Is:

- **Vedas (4):** Rig (hymns), Sama (melodies for rituals), Yajur (ritual procedures), Atharva (spells). Rig Veda = oldest; Atharva = most secular
- **Brahmanas:** Prose texts explaining the meaning of Vedic rituals; guide for priests
- **Aranyakas ("Forest Books"):** Transitional texts; philosophical reflections; meant to be studied in the forest in old age
- **Upanishads:** Philosophical dialogues; discuss ultimate reality (Brahman) and the self (Atman); basis of Hindu philosophy; "Satyameva Jayate" comes from Mundaka Upanishad

- **Epics:** Ramayana (Valmiki) and Mahabharata (Vyasa) — compiled in later period; Bhagavad Gita is part of Mahabharata

PART 3 — RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS OF THE 6TH CENTURY BCE

3. Buddhism and Jainism

By the 6th century BCE, there was growing dissatisfaction with the rigid Brahminical rituals, the caste system, and the expensive yajnas. Two major reform movements emerged from this discontent — **Buddhism** and **Jainism**. Both were founded in the Gangetic plains, both rejected the authority of the Vedas, and both taught ethical living over ritual. Their difference lies in their approach: Buddhism takes the "middle path," while Jainism practises extreme asceticism.

BUDDHISM VS JAINISM — FOUNDERS, TEACHINGS AND KEY DIFFERENCES

⊕ Buddhism

- ▶ **Founder:** Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BCE); born in Lumbini (Nepal); Kshatriya (warrior) clan — Shakya clan
- ▶ **Enlightenment:** At Bodh Gaya (under Peepal tree = Bodhi tree)
- ▶ **First sermon:** Sarnath (Deer Park) = "Dhammachakkapavattana" (Turning the Wheel of Dharma)
- ▶ **Death (Parinirvana):** Kushinagar
- ▶ **Middle Path:** Neither extreme luxury nor extreme asceticism
- ▶ **Four Noble Truths:** (1) Life is suffering (Dukkha); (2) Desire is cause; (3) End desire = end

⊗ Jainism

- ▶ **Founder (24th Tirthankara):** Vardhamana Mahavira (599–527 BCE); born at Vaishali; Kshatriya clan — Licchavi clan
- ▶ **First Tirthankara:** Rishabhanatha (Adinatha)
- ▶ **Enlightenment:** At Jrimbhikagrama (east of Vaishali)
- ▶ **Title "Mahavira"** = Great Hero; also called "Jina" (Conqueror) — hence Jainism
- ▶ **Five Vows (Pancha Mahavrata):** (1) Non-violence (Ahimsa — most important); (2) Truth (Satya); (3) Non-stealing (Asteya); (4) Celibacy (Brahmacharya); (5) Non-possession (Aparigraha)

suffering; (4) Eightfold Path leads to end of suffering

- ▶ **Eightfold Path (Ashtangika Marga):** Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration
- ▶ Rejected caste system and Vedic authority; open to all
- ▶ **Tripitakas** – Buddhist scriptures (Vinaya, Sutta, Abhidhamma Pitaka)

- ▶ **Extreme asceticism** – fasting, nudity (Digambara sect), pulling out hair
- ▶ **Triratnas (Three Jewels):** Right Faith, Right Knowledge, Right Conduct
- ▶ Two sects: **Digambara** (sky-clad = nude; more strict) and **Shvetambara** (white-clad; more lenient)
- ▶ Strong in Gujarat and Rajasthan

Buddhist Councils – Tracing the Development of Buddhism

1st Council
~483 BCE

Rajgir (Sattapanni Cave). Soon after Buddha's death. President: Mahakassapa. Compiled: Vinaya Pitaka (monastic rules, by Upali) + Sutta Pitaka (Buddha's discourses, by Ananda). Patron: King Ajatashatru of Magadha.

2nd Council
~383 BCE

Vaishali. ~100 years after Buddha. Cause: dispute over 10 monastic rules. Led to first schism – between Sthaviravadins (conservatives) and Mahasanghikas (liberals). Patron: King Kalasoka.

3rd Council
~250 BCE

Pataliputra. Under **Emperor Ashoka's** patronage. President: Moggaliputta Tissa. Compiled: Abhidhamma Pitaka. Aim: purify Buddhism; send missionaries worldwide. Ashoka's son Mahinda sent to Sri Lanka.

4th Council
~72 CE

Kashmir (Kundalvana). Under **Emperor Kanishka's** patronage (Kushana Empire). President: Vasumitra. Led to split into Hinayana (original, conservative) and Mahayana (new, liberal, Buddha = god) branches. Sanskrit adopted (replacing Pali).



NDA PYQs — Ancient India: Indus Valley & Religious Movements

Q1. The Great Bath, a remarkable feature of Indus Valley Civilisation, was found at: **NDA PYQ**

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

✓ Answer: (c) Mohenjo-Daro

The **Great Bath** at Mohenjo-Daro is one of the earliest known public water tanks — approximately 12 × 7 metres wide and 2.4 metres deep, lined with kiln-fired bricks made watertight with bitumen (natural tar). It was likely used for ritual purification. Mohenjo-Daro itself means "Mound of the Dead" in Sindhi. Lothal has the dockyard (port); Dholavira has the largest site in India; Harappa has granaries. This is a very directly tested NDA question.

Q2. Where did Gautam Buddha deliver his first sermon? **NDA PYQ**

- (a) Bodh Gaya (b) Sarnath (c) Kushinagar (d) Lumbini

✓ Answer: (b) Sarnath

After attaining enlightenment at **Bodh Gaya**, Gautam Buddha delivered his first sermon at **Sarnath** (near Varanasi) in the Deer Park — this event is called *Dhammachakkapavattana* (Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion). The Five Disciples who first heard this sermon became his first followers. Lumbini = birthplace; Bodh Gaya = enlightenment; Kushinagar = death (Parinirvana). NDA tests all four sacred places — know all four.

Q3. Which is the most important Vow in Jainism? **NDA PYQ**

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

✓ Answer: (b) Ahimsa (Non-violence)

Ahimsa (non-violence) is the cornerstone of Jainism and the most important of Mahavira's Five Vows (Pancha Mahavrata). Jains take this to an extreme — some carry a broom to sweep insects before sitting, and wear masks to prevent accidentally breathing in insects. This commitment to non-violence profoundly influenced Mahatma Gandhi,

who adopted Ahimsa as the foundation of his political philosophy. The Five Vows are: Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya (celibacy), Aparigraha.

Q4. The First Buddhist Council was held at: NDA PYQ

- (a) Vaishali (b) Pataliputra (c) Kashmir (d) Rajgir

✓ Answer: (d) Rajgir

The **First Buddhist Council** was held at **Rajgir (Rajagriha)** in the Sattapanni Cave, shortly after Buddha's death (~483 BCE), under the patronage of King Ajatashatru of Magadha. President: Mahakassapa. It compiled the Vinaya Pitaka (monastic rules) and Sutta Pitaka (discourses). Quick memory aid: 1st = Rajgir, 2nd = Vaishali, 3rd = Pataliputra (Ashoka), 4th = Kashmir (Kanishka).

Q5. Lothal, an Indus Valley site, is known for: NDA PYQ

- (a) The Great Bath (b) Evidence of ploughed field (c) A dockyard/port facility
(d) Largest granary

✓ Answer: (c) A dockyard/port facility

Lothal (Gujarat) is the only Indus Valley site with evidence of a **dockyard** — a rectangular basin (37 × 22 metres) connected to a river, used to dock ships for loading and unloading cargo. This proves maritime trade connections with the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia. Lothal also had a bead-making factory. The Great Bath = Mohenjo-Daro; Ploughed field = Kalibangan; Largest granary = Harappa or Mohenjo-Daro.

Q6. The Indus Valley Civilisation script is: ⚡ Tricky

- (a) Written left to right, fully deciphered (b) Written right to left, still undeciphered
(c) Identical to Brahmi script (d) A form of cuneiform

✓ Answer: (b) Written right to left, still undeciphered

The Indus Valley script has about 400+ distinct signs/symbols and is **still undeciphered** — the biggest unsolved puzzle in Indian history. It appears to have been written primarily from **right to left**, with some texts using alternating direction ("boustrophedon"). Because the language behind the script is unknown, all attempts to decipher it remain controversial. No bilingual inscription (like the Rosetta Stone for Egyptian hieroglyphics) has been found to help decode it.



Quick Memory Chart — HNo1

Indus Valley Sites

- ♦ Harappa: granaries; 1st discovered (1921)
- ♦ Mohenjo-Daro: Great Bath; "Mound of Dead"
- ♦ Lothal: dockyard/port (Gujarat)
- ♦ Kalibangan: ploughed field (Rajasthan)
- ♦ Script: undeciphered; ~400 symbols

Vedic Period

- ♦ Rig Veda = oldest; 1028 hymns
- ♦ 4 Vedas: Rig, Sama, Yajur, Atharva
- ♦ Upanishads = philosophical (Vedanta)
- ♦ Early Vedic: egalitarian; Punjab region
- ♦ Later Vedic: rigid caste; Gangetic plains

Buddhism & Jainism

- ♦ Buddha: born Lumbini; enlightened Bodh Gaya; first sermon Sarnath; died Kushinagar
- ♦ Four Noble Truths + Eightfold Path
- ♦ Mahavira: 24th Tirthankara; Five Vows
- ♦ Ahimsa = most important Jain vow
- ♦ 4 Councils: Rajgir, Vaishali, Pataliputra, Kashmir



Practice Exercise

E1. The "boustrophedon" style of writing means:

- (a) Writing only on stone
- (b) Writing in alternating directions (right-to-left, then left-to-right)
- (c) Writing with coloured dyes
- (d) Writing on palm leaves

E2. Satyameva Jayate (India's national motto) is taken from which text?

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

E3. The Third Buddhist Council was held during the reign of:

(a) Kanishka (b) Ajatashatru (c) Ashoka (d) Chandragupta Maurya

E4. Which Jain sect practices nudity as part of extreme asceticism?

(a) Shvetambara (b) Digambara (c) Theravada (d) Mahayana

Answers:

E1 → (b) Alternating directions [found in Indus Valley script; also in early Greek inscriptions] | E2 → (c) Mundaka Upanishad ["Truth alone triumphs" — Satyameva Jayate; adopted from Mundaka Upanishad on 26 January 1950] | E3 → (c) Ashoka [Third Council at Pataliputra (~250 BCE); Moggaliputta Tissa presided; missions sent to Sri Lanka, Greece, Egypt] | E4 → (b) Digambara ["Sky-clad" — nude; more orthodox; believe women cannot attain moksha; Shvetambara = white-robed; more lenient]

Building on this foundation: *HN02 picks up where HN01 leaves off — it covers the great empires that grew from this ancient soil: the Mauryan Empire (Ashoka's Dhamma, rock edicts), the Gupta "Golden Age" (Kalidasa, Aryabhata, Ajanta), and the Cholas (temple architecture, naval power). The religious movements you studied here — Buddhism especially — will reappear constantly in HN02 as we see emperors like Ashoka adopt and spread them.*



Mock Tests



Subject Quiz



Telegram

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