

# HN02 — Ancient India: Empires, Dynasties & Cultural Contributions

📖 HN02 · NDA General Ability Test — History

★ High Yield — 4–5 Questions

If HN01 gave you the foundations — the Indus Valley, the Vedic culture, Buddha, and Mahavira — this chapter shows you what those foundations built. The Mauryan Empire (322–185 BCE) was India's first great unified state. The Gupta Empire (320–550 CE) is called the "Golden Age" — a period when India led the world in science, mathematics, literature, and art. Between and after these empires, a series of dynasties kept Indian civilisation alive and creative. Every one of these periods leaves NDA examination material — understand the pattern of rulers, achievements, and decline.

📖 **NDA Focus:** Chanakya/Kautilya wrote Arthashastra (guide for statecraft); Ashoka's Kalinga War (261 BCE) was his turning point; Ashoka = Buddhism patron; Samudragupta = "Napoleon of India"; Chandragupta II = "Vikramaditya"; Aryabhata = concept of zero + Earth rotates on axis; Kalidasa = "Shakuntala" (drama); Ajanta caves = Buddhist art, Gupta period; Chola bronzes = Nataraja (Shiva).

## PART 1 — MAHAJANAPADAS & RISE OF MAGADHA

### 1. The Sixteen Mahajanapadas and Magadha's Rise

Before the empires came the **Mahajanapadas** — "great kingdoms" or territorial states. By around 600 BCE, the Vedic tribal republics had evolved into 16 major kingdoms (Mahajanapadas). Of these, **Magadha** (in modern Bihar) was the most powerful and became the base from which all future empires emerged. Understanding why Magadha was dominant helps explain the entire pattern of ancient Indian political history.

#### 📖 WHY MAGADHA DOMINATED

#### 🏃 HARYANKA DYNASTY

- ▶ Founded by Bimbisara (544–492 BCE) —

#### 🏃 SHISHUNAGA & NANDA DYNASTIES

- ▶ Strategic location: between Ganga and Son rivers — access to water and fertile land
- ▶ Rich in iron ore deposits (Rajgir region) — superior iron weapons
- ▶ Elephant forests — war elephants as decisive military advantage
- ▶ Capital Pataliputra (modern Patna) on Ganga — ideal for trade and defence

contemporary of Buddha; first great Magadha ruler

- ▶ **Ajatashatru** (492–460 BCE): Killed his father Bimbisara; aggressive expansionist; fought Vajji republic; patronised First Buddhist Council
- ▶ Founded Pataliputra (Rajgir was earlier capital)

- ▶ **Shishunaga**: Defeated Pradyota of Avanti; major expansion of Magadha
- ▶ **Nanda Dynasty** (345–321 BCE): Founded by Mahapadma Nanda; last Nanda = Dhana Nanda
- ▶ Nandas built huge treasury; first dynasty of non-Kshatriya origin (possibly of low birth)
- ▶ Alexander the Great's army refused to cross the Beas River in 326 BCE — fearing Nanda army

## PART 2 — MAURYAN EMPIRE (322–185 BCE)

# 2. The Mauryan Empire — India's First Unified State

The Mauryan Empire was the largest political entity in Indian history until the British Raj. Founded by **Chandragupta Maurya** (with the guidance of his brilliant minister **Chanakya/Kautilya**), it stretched from Afghanistan in the northwest to Bengal in the east, and from Kashmir in the north to Karnataka in the south. The empire is most famous for its third ruler — **Ashoka the Great** — whose conversion to Buddhism after the Kalinga War changed Indian history.

### THREE GREAT MAURYAN RULERS — CONTRIBUTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

**Chandragupta Maurya (322–297 BCE)** Founded the empire after overthrowing the Nanda dynasty. Guided by **Chanakya (Kautilya)** — who wrote the **Arthashastra** (a comprehensive guide to statecraft, espionage, and economic policy — one of the world's earliest political science texts). Defeated Greek general Seleucus Nicator (successor of

Alexander) and married his daughter. Abdicated throne, became Jain monk, died fasting (*Sallekhana*) at Shravanabelagola.

**Bindusara (297–272 BCE)** Son of Chandragupta; expanded empire southward into the Deccan. Called "Amitraghata" (slayer of enemies) by Greeks. Maintained contacts with Greek rulers; requested Greek wine, dried figs, and a philosopher from Antiochus I. Father of Ashoka.

**Ashoka the Great (268–232 BCE)** **Kalinga War (261 BCE):** Fought and won but was horrified by the ~100,000 deaths. This was his turning point — he converted to Buddhism and proclaimed **Dhamma** (moral law based on non-violence, respect, and compassion). Sent Buddhist missionaries worldwide (including son Mahinda to Sri Lanka). **Rock and Pillar Edicts:** stone inscriptions sharing his Dhamma across the empire. **Ashoka's Lion Capital** (from Sarnath pillar) = India's national emblem.

#### Ashoka's Edicts — Direct NDA Questions:

- **Rock Edicts (Major: 14; Minor: many):** Inscribed on large rocks across the empire; describe Dhamma principles, welfare measures, animal protection
- **Pillar Edicts (7 major):** On polished sandstone pillars; more personal; describe Ashoka's religious journey
- **Girnar (Gujarat):** First Major Rock Edict discovered (1837 by James Prinsep, who also deciphered Brahmi script)
- **Dhamma Mahamattas:** Officers appointed by Ashoka to spread Dhamma and look after welfare
- **Major achievements:** Built 84,000 stupas; established hospitals for humans and animals; planted trees along roads; dug wells; sent missionaries to Greece, Egypt, Sri Lanka

### PART 3 — POST-MAURYAN PERIOD & KUSHANAS

## 3. Post-Mauryan India and the Kushana Empire

 SHUNGA DYNASTY

 SATAVAHANA  
DYNASTY (1ST BCE–3RD

 KUSHANA EMPIRE

### (185–73 BCE)

- ▶ Founded by Pushyamitra Shunga (Mauryan general who killed last Mauryan ruler)
- ▶ Revival of Brahminism; performed Ashvamedha (horse sacrifice)
- ▶ Repelled Greek invasions from Bactria
- ▶ Built famous **Sanchi Stupa** gateways (Toranas)

### CE)

- ▶ Controlled the Deccan and parts of Andhra and Maharashtra
- ▶ Important patrons of art and architecture — Amaravati Stupa
- ▶ Simuka = founder; Gautamiputra Satakarni = greatest ruler
- ▶ Led resistance against Shakas; used title "Lord of Dakshinapatha"

### (1ST–3RD CE)

- ▶ **Kanishka I** (c. 78–144 CE): Greatest Kushana ruler; capital Purushapura (Peshawar)
- ▶ Patron of Buddhism: presided over **4th Buddhist Council** (Kashmir)
- ▶ His era may mark the start of the **Shaka Era** (78 CE) — still used in Indian national calendar
- ▶ Developed **Gandhara art** — Greek + Indian style; first human images of Buddha
- ▶ Mathura art school: pure Indian style of Buddha images

## PART 4 — GUPTA EMPIRE — THE GOLDEN AGE (320–550 CE)

### 4. The Gupta "Golden Age"

The Gupta period is called India's "Golden Age" because it witnessed extraordinary achievements across almost every field of human endeavour — mathematics, astronomy, medicine, literature, art, and philosophy — simultaneously. While the Mauryans were known for political power, the Guptas are celebrated for cultural brilliance. This makes them a favourite topic in NDA — the achievements section is particularly heavy with questions.

#### KEY GUPTA RULERS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Chandragupta I (320–335 CE)** Founder of Gupta Empire proper; started the **Gupta Era (320 CE)**; married Licchavi princess Kumaradevi — gave

political legitimacy; took title "Maharajadhiraja" (King of Kings).

**Samudragupta (335–375 CE) – "Napoleon of India"** Greatest military ruler; conquered most of the subcontinent (described in **Allahabad Pillar Inscription** by court poet Harishena). Called "Napoleon of India" by V.A. Smith. Also a poet and musician — played veena. Two policies: defeat and annexe northern kings; defeat and leave southern kings as tributaries (Dharmavijayin).

**Chandragupta II "Vikramaditya" (375–415 CE)** Golden Age peak; took title "Vikramaditya"; defeated Shakas of western India (Gujarat/Rajasthan) — incorporated them; controlled trade routes to Rome. Chinese pilgrim **Fa-Hien (Faxian)** visited — wrote glowing account of prosperity and law and order. **Nine Gems (Navaratnas)** of his court: Kalidasa (literature), Aryabhata (math/astronomy), Varahamihira (astronomy), Amara Simha (Sanskrit lexicon), Dhanvantari (medicine), etc.

## Golden Age Achievements — Science, Literature and Art

### SCIENCE & MATHEMATICS

- ▶ **Aryabhata (499 CE — *Aryabhatiya*):** Explained concept of zero; calculated Pi ( $\pi \approx 3.1416$ ); proved Earth rotates on its axis; calculated Earth's circumference (24,835 miles — close to actual 24,902); calculated

### LITERATURE & MEDICINE

- ▶ **Kalidasa:** Greatest Sanskrit poet and dramatist; works include *Shakuntala* (play; influenced Goethe), *Meghaduta* (cloud messenger poem), *Raghuvamsha*, *Kumarasambhava*, *Malavikagnimitra*

### ART & ARCHITECTURE

- ▶ **Ajanta Caves (Maharashtra):** Buddhist cave monastery; paintings (Gupta period ones are famous — Bodhisattva Padmapani is most celebrated); some caves date to earlier

solar year at 365.358 days

- ▶ **Brahmagupta:** Rules for operations with zero; negative numbers
- ▶ **Varahamihira** (*Panchasiddhantika*, *Brihatsamhita*): Astronomy, astrology, meteorology
- ▶ Decimal system and place value notation developed

- ▶ **Vishakhadatta:** *Mudrarakshasa* (play about Chandragupta Maurya)

- ▶ **Charaka** (*Charaka Samhita*): Medicine; 8 branches of Ayurveda

- ▶ **Sushruta** (*Sushruta Samhita*): Surgery; described 300+ surgical procedures; "Father of Surgery"

but Gupta-era paintings dominate

- ▶ **Ellora Caves:** Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain caves side by side; Kailasa Temple at Ellora = Rashtrakuta, not Gupta

- ▶ **Dashavatara Temple** (Deogarh): One of earliest Panchayatana temples; depicts ten avatars of Vishnu

- ▶ **Iron Pillar of Delhi** (in Qutb complex): Erected during Gupta period; remarkable rust-resistant iron

- ▶ **Nalanda University:** Founded/expanded during Gupta period; great Buddhist centre of learning

## PART 5 – LATER DYNASTIES: CHOLAS & HARSHA

# 5. Harshavardhana and the Chola Empire

### Harshavardhana (606–647 CE)

- ▶ Ruled from Kanauj (Uttar Pradesh); last great north Indian emperor before the Turks
- ▶ Patron of Buddhism; convened annual religious assemblies at Prayag (Allahabad)
- ▶ Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hieun Tsang/Yuan Chwang) visited —

### Chola Empire (9th–13th CE)

- ▶ **Raja Raja I** (985–1014 CE): Revived Chola power; conquered Sri Lanka; built **Brihadeeswara Temple** (Thanjavur) — a masterpiece of Dravidian architecture; world's first complete granite temple
- ▶ **Rajendra I** (1014–1044 CE): Son; took title "Gangaikonda" (conqueror who brought Ganga water); launched

wrote *Si-Yu-Ki* (Record of Western Countries); praised Harsha's justice and generosity

- ▶ Harsha himself was a poet and playwright (*Ratnavali*, *Priyadarshika*, *Nagananda*)
- ▶ **Nalanda University:** Flourished under Harsha; Xuanzang studied there
- ▶ Defeated by Chalukya king Pulakeshi II in the south — could not expand beyond Narmada

naval expeditions to Southeast Asia (Srivijaya empire in Sumatra); built Gangaikondacholapuram

- ▶ **Local self-government:** Famous "Uttaramerur inscription" (village assembly democracy); three committees (Vari): garden committee, tank committee, gold committee
- ▶ **Chola bronzes:** Finest bronze sculpture in the world; **Nataraja** (Shiva as cosmic dancer) is most iconic; lost-wax (cire perdue) technique

## NDA PYQs — Ancient Empires & Culture

**Q1. Arthashastra, a treatise on statecraft and economic policy, was written by:** **NDA PYQ**

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

✓ Answer: (b) Kautilya (Chanakya)

The **Arthashastra** was written by **Kautilya** (also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta) — the brilliant minister of Chandragupta Maurya. It is one of the world's earliest and most comprehensive texts on political science, economics, diplomacy, and statecraft. It covers topics ranging from how to select ministers and run espionage networks to agricultural policies and taxation. It was rediscovered in 1905 by R. Shamasastri in a Mysore library — a landmark in Indian historical scholarship.

**Q2. The "Napoleon of India" was the title given to:** **NDA PYQ**

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

✓ Answer: (c) Samudragupta

**Samudragupta** (335–375 CE) was given the title "Napoleon of India" by historian V.A. Smith because of his remarkable military campaigns — he conquered nearly the entire

Indian subcontinent. His conquests are described in the **Allahabad Pillar Inscription** composed by his court poet Harishena. Like Napoleon, Samudragupta was both a brilliant military commander AND a cultured person (poet and musician). His policy was to annex northern kingdoms and keep southern kings as respectful tributaries.

**Q3. Kalidasa's famous play "Shakuntala" is based on a story from:** **NDA PYQ**

- (a) Rig Veda (b) Arthashastra (c) Mahabharata (d) Ramayana

✓ Answer: (c) Mahabharata

Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* (Recognition of Shakuntala) is based on a story from the **Mahabharata** — the tale of King Dushyanta, the celestial nymph Shakuntala, and their son Bharata (from whom India gets the name "Bharata"). The play so impressed German poet Goethe that he wrote: "If you want the bloom of youth and the fruits of later years in one name, then I would say: Shakuntala, that is all!" Kalidasa is often called the "Shakespeare of India."

**Q4. The Brihadeeswara Temple at Thanjavur was built by:** **NDA PYQ**

- (a) Rajendra Chola I (b) Raja Raja Chola I (c) Krishnadevaraya (d) Pulakeshi II

✓ Answer: (b) Raja Raja Chola I

The **Brihadeeswara Temple** (also called Rajarajesvaram or the "Big Temple") at Thanjavur was built by **Raja Raja Chola I** (985–1014 CE), completed around 1010 CE. It is a masterpiece of Dravidian architecture — the world's first complete granite temple. The 66-metre vimana (tower) is remarkable; the giant Shiva lingam inside is one of the largest in India. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Rajendra I (his son) built Gangaikondacholapuram — a common source of NDA confusion.

**Q5. Which Chinese pilgrim visited India during the reign of Chandragupta II?**

**NDA PYQ**

- (a) Xuanzang (Hieun Tsang) (b) I-Tsing (c) Fa-Hien (Faxian) (d) Meng-chi

✓ Answer: (c) Fa-Hien (Faxian)

**Fa-Hien (Faxian)** visited India during the reign of **Chandragupta II Vikramaditya** (399–414 CE). He came to collect Buddhist manuscripts and relics. His account paints a picture of a prosperous, peaceful land with a just ruler. **Xuanzang (Hieun Tsang)** visited during **Harshavardhana's** reign (629–645 CE) — this is a very common NDA confusion. Remember: Fa-Hien = Gupta (Chandragupta II); Xuanzang = Harsha.

## Q6. The famous Nataraja bronze statue represents:

NDA PYQ

- (a) Brahma as creator    (b) Vishnu as preserver    (c) Shiva as cosmic dancer  
(d) Indra as rain god

✓ Answer: (c) Shiva as cosmic dancer

The **Nataraja** ("Lord of Dance") sculpture represents **Shiva** performing the Tandava — the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. The form has profound symbolism: the fire in his left hand = destruction; the drum (damaru) in his right hand = creation; the raised left foot = liberation; the figure under his right foot = the demon of ignorance. Chola bronzes (9th–13th CE) are the finest metalwork in Indian history, made using the lost-wax (cire perdue) technique. The Nataraja is now an internationally recognised symbol of Indian art.

## 🧠 Quick Memory Chart — HNO<sub>2</sub>

### 🏹 Mauryan Empire

- ♦ Founded: Chandragupta Maurya (322 BCE)
- ♦ Chanakya wrote: Arthashastra
- ♦ Ashoka: Kalinga War (261 BCE) → Buddhism
- ♦ Lion Capital (Sarnath) = India's emblem
- ♦ Fa-Hien ≠ Gupta; Xuanzang = Harsha

### 🌟 Gupta Golden Age

- ♦ Samudragupta = "Napoleon of India"
- ♦ Chandragupta II = "Vikramaditya"
- ♦ Aryabhata: zero, Earth rotates, Pi
- ♦ Kalidasa: Shakuntala, Meghaduta
- ♦ Ajanta caves = Buddhist; Gupta art

### 🏛️ Art & Architecture

- ♦ Brihadeeswara Temple: Raja Raja Chola I
- ♦ Gangaikondacholapuram: Rajendra Chola I
- ♦ Nataraja = Shiva as cosmic dancer
- ♦ Gandhara art: Greek + Indian (Kushana)
- ♦ Sanchi Stupa gateways: Shunga period



## Practice Exercise

**E1. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription describes the conquests of:**

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

**E2. Which Indian mathematician of the Gupta period wrote "Aryabhatiya"?**

- (a) Brahmagupta   (b) Aryabhata   (c) Varahamihira   (d) Charaka

**E3. The "Uttaramerur inscription" provides evidence of which Chola achievement?**

- (a) Naval expeditions to SE Asia   (b) Temple construction programme  
(c) Local self-government through village assemblies   (d) Tax collection reforms

**Answers:**

E1 → (c) Samudragupta [composed by court poet Harishena; V.A. Smith called Samudragupta "Napoleon of India"] | E2 → (b) Aryabhata [Aryabhatiya (499 CE); calculated Pi, Earth's circumference, Earth rotates on axis; concept of zero; astronomy] | E3 → (c) Village assemblies [Uttaramerur inscription describes the Ward Sabha (village committee) system — earliest evidence of democratic local governance in India]

**Moving to Medieval India:** *The Gupta Empire declined by ~550 CE, and for the next several centuries India was fragmented into regional kingdoms. HN03 picks up with the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526 CE) — when Turkic-Afghan rulers from Central Asia established Islam as a significant political and cultural force in India for the first time. The architectural styles, administrative systems, and socio-religious tensions of this period set the stage for the Mughal Empire that follows in HN04.*

 **Mock Tests**

 **Subject Quiz**

 **Telegram**

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