

ANCIENT INDIA

RELIGION AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Two of the world's great religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, began in India, and so did Jainism. Indian thinkers also gave the world great poems, a new way to write numbers and ideas about medicine and the stars.

The Vedas and Hindu Beliefs

From about 1500 BC, priests composed the **Vedas**, holy hymns in Sanskrit, an old language of India. For centuries they were passed down by memory, in what historians call the Vedic period. Vedic beliefs grew into Hinduism, which has no single founder and spread across India. Hinduism has many gods, and many Hindus see them as forms of one great spirit, Brahman. Hindu teachings say each person should follow dharma, their duty. After death, the soul is reborn, and karma, the results of a person's actions, shapes the next life. The final goal is moksha, freedom from rebirth.



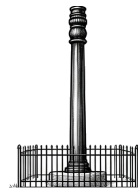
The Buddha and Mahavira

Siddhartha Gautama, a prince born at Lumbini, left home troubled by suffering. At Bodh Gaya, while meditating under a tree, he became the Buddha, "the awakened one." At

Sarnath he taught the Four Noble Truths: life brings suffering; suffering comes from wanting things; it can end; and the way to end it is the Eightfold Path, a guide to right thinking and acting. The goal is **nirvana**, freedom from suffering and rebirth. Most Buddhists honor him as a teacher, not as a god. His followers memorized his teachings and later wrote them down.

Great Poems in Sanskrit

Two long Sanskrit poems, sacred epics to many Hindus, are among the world's most famous stories. The **Ramayana** tells how Prince Rama rescues his wife, Sita, from the demon king Ravana. The **Mahabharata**, one of the longest poems ever composed, tells of a great war between two branches of one royal family. Part of it is the **Bhagavad Gita**, "the Song of the Lord." In it, the god Krishna tells the warrior Arjuna to do his duty. The Gita also teaches that loving devotion to God is a path open to everyone. These poems were recited for centuries before they were written down.



Zero, Medicine and Iron

Indian thinkers made great advances, especially in Gupta times. About AD 499, Aryabhata wrote that the Earth spins, which makes the stars seem to move. He worked with place value, where a digit's place gives its value. In AD 628, Brahmagupta wrote rules for using zero as a number. An old medical book named for Sushruta describes surgery, even rebuilding a damaged nose. Gupta metalworkers made the Iron Pillar, now in Delhi, which has barely rusted in about 1,600 years.

TIMELINE

~1500 BC	~600–500 BC	~250 BC	~AD 400	~AD 499	AD 628
The Vedas are composed in Sanskrit	The Buddha and Mahavira teach	Ashoka sends Buddhist missionaries to other lands	The Iron Pillar is made	Aryabhata writes that the Earth spins	Brahmagupta writes rules for zero

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Siddhartha Gautama	The Buddha, "the awakened one"; born at Lumbini, taught the Four Noble Truths
Mahavira	Teacher of Jainism who taught ahimsa, doing no harm to any living thing
Aryabhata	Mathematician and astronomer who wrote about AD 499 that the Earth spins
Brahmagupta	Mathematician who wrote rules for zero in AD 628

WORDS TO KNOW

Vedas	the oldest holy hymns of India, composed in Sanskrit and passed down by memory
nirvana	in Buddhism, freedom from suffering and from the cycle of rebirth
Ramayana	a long Sanskrit poem about Prince Rama, who rescues his wife, Sita
Mahabharata	a very long Sanskrit poem about a war between two branches of one royal family
Bhagavad Gita	part of the Mahabharata in which Krishna teaches Arjuna about duty and devotion