

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Post-Mauryan Period

Paper 1 · Unit 8

Shungas to Kushanas, Indo-Greek contact, Gandhara and Mathura, and the Roman trade: 50 marks in four years, and the period when India was most connected to the wider world.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Post-Mauryan period, Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Kushanas, Western Kshatrapas: contact with the outside world; growth of urban centres, economy, coinage, development of religions, Mahayana, social conditions, art, architecture, culture and literature.

The successor states

Political fragmentation after 185 BCE produced not decline but an unusually open period, with foreign dynasties ruling large parts of the north and integrating into Indian society.

- **Shungas** under Pushyamitra ruled from about 185 BCE over a reduced territory centred on Vidisha and Pataliputra, and the dynasty's Brahmanical revivalism is usually inferred from Patanjali's reference to a horse sacrifice.
- Buddhist sources accuse Pushyamitra of persecution, but the **Bharhut stupa railing and the Sanchi railings belong to his period**, which makes the persecution charge hard to sustain.
- **Kanvas** succeeded around 73 BCE under Vasudeva and lasted about forty five years before the Satavahanas absorbed their territory.
- **Indo-Greeks or Bactrian Greeks** entered the northwest from about 200 BCE, and **Menander**, ruling around 155 to 130 BCE, is the best known, remembered in the Pali **Milindapanha** as a convert questioning the monk Nagasena.
- **Sakas or Scythians** followed from about the first century BCE, and the **Western Kshatrapas** of Ujjain and Gujarat, with **Rudradaman I** the outstanding ruler, held western India for centuries.
- **Parthians or Pahlavas** ruled briefly in the northwest, and **Gondophares** is associated in Christian tradition with the apostle Thomas.
- **Kushanas** under **Kujula Kadphises** established the dynasty, and **Kanishka**, whose accession is conventionally dated to 78 CE and identified with the Saka era, ruled an empire from Central Asia to the Ganga plain with capitals at Purushapura and Mathura.
- **Chronology of Kanishka** remains genuinely disputed, with dates proposed between 78 and 144 CE, and the identification of his accession with the Saka era of 78 CE is a convention rather than a settled fact.
- **Satavahanas** in the Deccan, treated fully in the next unit, are the southern contemporary and the 2026 paper asked about them as a link between north and south.

Contact with the outside world

Named first in the syllabus, and the defining feature of the period. India was never more connected before the modern era.

- **Silk Road** trade linked China through Central Asia to Rome, and Kushana control of the passes made them the intermediaries who taxed and protected it.
- **Roman trade** flourished from the first century CE, greatly assisted by **Hippalus** and the exploitation of the monsoon winds, which allowed direct sailing across the Arabian Sea instead of coastal creeping.
- **Periplus of the Erythraean Sea**, a Greek merchant's handbook of about 60 CE, names ports, goods and prices, and it is the single best source for Indian Ocean trade in the period.

- Indian exports were **spices, pepper, textiles, ivory, precious stones, indigo and animals**, and imports were principally **wine, glass, metals and above all gold and silver coin**.
- **Pliny the Elder** complained that India drained Rome of fifty five million sesterces a year, and the **hoards of Roman coins found in the Coromandel and Kerala** confirm the direction of the bullion flow.
- **Arikamedu** near Pondicherry, excavated by Wheeler, yielded Roman amphorae, Arretine ware and glass, and it is the type site for Indo-Roman contact.
- **Central Asian contact** brought the horse, riding equipment including the stirrup in some accounts, new dress including the tunic, trousers and boots seen in Kushana sculpture, and the title of great king of kings.
- **Ports** named in the Periplus include Barbaricum at the Indus mouth, **Barygaza** or Broach, Muziris and Nelkynda on the Malabar coast, and Arikamedu on the east, and knowing three of them by name is enough for any trade question.
- **Chinese contact** ran both ways, with silk arriving and Buddhism travelling out along the same routes, and the transmission of Buddhism to China is the period's largest cultural consequence.

KEY TERMS

Periplus — A Greek navigational and commercial handbook; the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea of about 60 CE describes Indian Ocean ports and trade.

Coinage and economy

The 2024 paper asked about the Western Kshatrapas and their socio-economic contribution, which is largely a question about trade, coinage and urbanisation.

- **Indo-Greek coins** are the first Indian coins to carry **portraits of rulers and their names**, bilingual in Greek and Prakrit, and they establish a chronology that Indian sources alone could not provide.
- That numismatic evidence is why roughly forty Indo-Greek rulers are known, most of them attested by coins and by nothing else.
- **Kushana gold coinage** under Vima Kadphises and Kanishka was the first substantial gold currency in India, modelled on Roman weight standards, and it depicts an extraordinary range of Greek, Iranian, Indian and Zoroastrian deities.
- That divine variety on Kanishka's coins, including Buddha, Shiva, Mithra, Nana and Helios, is the clearest evidence of the empire's deliberate religious pluralism.
- **Western Kshatrapa silver coins** are dated by regnal or Saka era year, which makes them exceptionally useful for chronology, and Rudradaman's are among the finest.
- **Junagadh rock inscription of Rudradaman**, dated 150 CE, is the earliest substantial **Sanskrit inscription** and records the repair of the Sudarshana lake originally built under the Mauryas.
- Urban growth is well attested at **Mathura, Taxila, Ujjain, Kaushambi, Vidisha and Nagarjunakonda**, and the period's cities were manufacturing and trading centres rather than merely administrative ones.
- **Guilds** flourished, and inscriptions record shrenis acting as bankers, receiving permanent endowments and paying the interest to monasteries, which is a documented early form of trust.

- **Nasik and Karle inscriptions** record donations by Yavanas, that is by people of Greek or west Asian origin resident in India, which is direct evidence that foreign traders settled and integrated rather than merely visiting.
- **Craft specialisation** deepened, with inscriptions naming weavers, oil pressers, potters, goldsmiths, ivory carvers and perfumers as donors, and their ability to donate indicates real prosperity.

The rise of Mahayana

The period's most consequential religious development, and it is named explicitly in the syllabus.

- **Fourth Buddhist Council**, held under Kanishka in Kashmir under Vasumitra with Ashvaghosha, is traditionally associated with the formal division into **Hinayana and Mahayana**.
- Mahayana introduced the **bodhisattva ideal**, in which the aspirant postpones nirvana to help all beings, replacing the arhat ideal of individual liberation.
- **Buddha as an object of devotion** rather than as a teacher who had passed beyond is the decisive shift, and it made image worship, prayer and grace central where they had been absent.
- **Image making** begins in this period, since earlier Buddhist art represented the Buddha only through symbols such as the footprint, the empty throne, the wheel and the bodhi tree.
- **Doctrinal development** came through **Nagarjuna** and the **Madhyamaka** school with its doctrine of shunyata or emptiness, and later through Asanga and Vasubandhu and the Yogachara school.
- **Sanskrit replaced Pali** as the language of Mahayana texts, which connected Buddhism to the wider Brahmanical intellectual world and to Central Asian and Chinese transmission.
- **Ashvaghosha's Buddhacharita**, a Sanskrit epic life of the Buddha, is the period's major literary work and marks Buddhism's entry into classical Sanskrit literature.
- **Merchant and royal patronage** underwrote the change, since a devotional religion with accumulating merit suited donors better than a monastic discipline aimed at individual renunciation.
- **Hinayana survived and flourished** in this period too, particularly the Sarvastivada school in the northwest, so Mahayana did not displace the older traditions so much as grow alongside them.
- **Transmission to China** followed the trade routes, with the first translations made in the second century CE, and Mahayana rather than the older schools became the dominant East Asian form.

Gandhara and Mathura

Two schools producing the first Buddha images at roughly the same time, and the standard comparison question in this unit.

- **Gandhara school** worked in grey schist and later stucco in the northwest, and its Buddha is Apollonian, with wavy hair, a draped toga-like robe with heavy naturalistic folds, and a sharply modelled face.
- Its inspiration is **Graeco-Roman**, transmitted through Bactria and the Roman east, and the school is often called Graeco-Buddhist for that reason.
- **Mathura school** worked in **mottled red sandstone from Sikri**, and its Buddha is fleshy, robust and frontal, with the right shoulder bare, a shaven head with a spiral usnisha, and a transparent clinging robe.

- Mathura drew on the **indigenous yaksha tradition**, and its continuity with the Didarganj and Parkham figures is visible in the modelling and the frontality.
- Beyond Buddhism, the school produced **Jain tirthankara images and Brahmanical deities**, so Mathura was never a purely Buddhist workshop in the way Gandhara largely was.
- **Kanishka's headless statue from Mat near Mathura**, in Central Asian coat and boots, is the best known royal portrait of the period and shows Mathura serving the dynasty directly.
- Priority between the two schools was long disputed, and the modern position is that **both developed the Buddha image at about the same time in the first century CE** for the same devotional reasons.
- **Bodhisattva images** are the Gandhara school's distinctive contribution, richly jewelled and princely in dress, and they contrast sharply with the austere Buddha figures beside them.
- **Amaravati school** in Andhra, working in white limestone under Satavahana patronage, is the third and is distinguished by narrative relief panels of great fluidity and by slender elongated figures.
- **Architecture** developed the rock-cut chaitya hall and vihara at Karle, Bhaja, Nasik and Kanheri, and the Karle chaitya is the finest of the period.

	Gandhara	Mathura
Material	Grey schist, later stucco	Mottled red sandstone from Sikri
Inspiration	Graeco-Roman	Indigenous yaksha tradition
Buddha type	Wavy hair, toga-like robe, heavy folds	Shaven head, bare right shoulder, transparent robe
Expression	Spiritual, restrained, calm	Robust, energetic, smiling
Subjects	Overwhelmingly Buddhist	Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical

Gandhara against Mathura. The material and the drapery are the two discriminators to name first.

Society, religion and literature

The social question in this period is how foreign ruling groups were absorbed, and Brahmanical texts record real anxiety about it.

- **Foreign groups were absorbed** into the varna order as degraded kshatriyas, and the Manusmriti's category of **vratya kshatriya** is generally read as the mechanism for accommodating Sakas, Yavanas and Pahlavas.
- **Manusmriti**, compiled roughly in this period, hardened varna rules, restricted women's independence and elaborated the theory of **varnasankara** or mixing of castes, and its anxiety is itself evidence that mixing was happening.
- **Kaliyuga** descriptions in the Puranas, lamenting the reversal of social order and the rule of shudras and mlecchas, belong to the same anxiety.
- Women's position in the normative texts narrowed, while inscriptional evidence shows **women making substantial donations to monasteries in their own names**, which is the standard tension between prescription and practice.
- **Brahmanical religion** developed towards devotional theism in this period, with the **Bhagavata and Shaiva** traditions taking shape and the Heliodorus pillar at Besnagar, erected by a Greek envoy in honour of Vasudeva, showing foreign participation.

- **Sanskrit literature** flourished, with Ashvaghosha's Buddhacharita and Saundarananda, the medical compendium of **Charaka** associated with Kanishka's court, and the **Sushruta Samhita** on surgery.
- **Guild seals and inscriptions** from Vaishali, Bhita and Basarh show shrenis with their own seals, treasurers and rules, and the fact that a guild could receive a permanent endowment and pay out interest indefinitely implies both institutional continuity and enforceable contract.
- **Sangam literature** in the far south belongs to roughly this period and describes a society with its own kings, poets and trade with Rome, treated fully in the next unit.
- **Urban decline** in the later part of the period, from about the third century CE, is visible archaeologically at several sites and is one of the pillars of R. S. Sharma's later argument about early medieval feudalism.
- **Astronomy and mathematics** absorbed Greek influence, and the terms horashastra and kendra in Indian astronomy are Greek loanwords, which is concrete evidence of transmission.

What the questions ask

Three questions in four years, on the Western Kshatrapas, on India and Central Asia, and on the Shungas and Kanvas. All three are about connection.

- Where the question names **contacts with Central Asia**, as the 2025 paper did, structure the answer as political, economic, religious and artistic effects rather than as a dynastic narrative.
- On the **Western Kshatrapas**, lead with the Junagadh inscription, the dated silver coinage and the Ujjain-Broach trade axis, since those are the concrete contributions.
- The **Shunga and Kanva** question of 2026 asked for political and socio-cultural change, so pair the political fragmentation with the Bharhut and Sanchi art and the Patanjali evidence.
- Resist the persecution narrative about Pushyamitra unless you qualify it, because the Buddhist art of his own period undercuts it.
- Where a question offers a **quotation about foreign rule**, remember that these dynasties were absorbed rather than resisted, adopting Indian titles, patronising Indian religions and issuing coins with Indian deities, which is the opposite of the pattern the word invasion suggests.
- Treat this period as **the most cosmopolitan in ancient Indian history**, and let that framing organise the answer, because it is both true and the thing examiners are testing.

Last-mile revision

- Shungas from about 185 BCE; Kanvas about 73 BCE; Menander about 155-130 BCE and the Milindapanha; Rudradaman and the Junagadh inscription of 150 CE.
- Kanishka's accession conventionally 78 CE and the Saka era; capitals Purushapura and Mathura; Fourth Council in Kashmir.
- Periplus about 60 CE; Hippalus and the monsoon; Arikamedu; Pliny on 55 million sesterces.
- Indo-Greek coins first with portraits and names; Kushana gold on Roman standards; Kshatrapa silver dated by year.
- Mahayana: bodhisattva ideal, Buddha as devotional object, image worship, Sanskrit, Nagarjuna and Madhyamaka, Ashvaghosha's Buddhacharita.

- Gandhara grey schist and Graeco-Roman; Mathura red Sikri sandstone and yaksha tradition; Amaravati white limestone under the Satavahanas; both Buddha images about the first century CE.
- Manusmriti and varnasankara anxiety; Heliodorus pillar at Besnagar; Charaka and Sushruta.

Common errors to avoid

- Accepting the persecution of Buddhism by Pushyamitra uncritically. Bharhut and Sanchi were built in his period.
- Saying Gandhara produced the first Buddha image and Mathura copied it. Both developed the image at about the same time for the same devotional reasons.
- Calling Mathura a Buddhist school. It produced Jain and Brahmanical images too, which Gandhara largely did not.
- Treating the period as one of decline between the Mauryas and the Guptas. It is the most externally connected period in ancient Indian history.
- Forgetting that the Junagadh inscription of 150 CE is the earliest substantial Sanskrit inscription, which is a frequently asked detail.

Mains Practice

Examine the nature and impact of India's contacts with Central Asia during the 1st to 3rd century CE.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

Evaluate the political and socio-cultural changes in North India after the decline of the Mauryan Empire under the Shunga and Kanva dynasties.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

Western Kshatrapas are known for their socio-economic contribution, particularly in trade, agriculture and urbanization. Examine.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024