

History
UNFOLDING

ANCIENT INDIA



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Introduction

India's Legacy

This MindSparks set is the first of two covering the story of India from ancient times through the Mughal empire that lasted until just before the age of British imperial control. The second set is titled India: the Mauryas to the Mughal Empire.

India's long, complex history cannot be covered in any depth even in two of our sets. All we can hope to do is provide the visual support materials needed to focus on some key cultural and political themes in that rich and enormous historical record. In this set, we look at the rise of one of the world's earliest civilizations in the Indus River valley, on the edge of the Indian subcontinent. We consider how India's geography has affected the way its history has unfolded. And then we focus on the unique spiritual and religious cultural heritage of India. In many ways, it is this heritage, rather than any political history or set of institutions, that has been the unifying factor in Indian society and its development.

These themes are explored in the set's 12 visual displays. Each lesson uses three of these visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

India: The Natural Setting

The vast mountain ranges in the north, the Indus and Ganges river systems, and the monsoon patterns and the isolated southern part of the subcontinent—these are the focus of the illustrations in this lesson.

The Indus River Civilization

A look at what was one of the four great early river-valley civilizations and perhaps the most mysterious and least understood of them.

Aryans and the Vedic Age

The Aryans were a nomadic, warlike people who brought their Vedic deities to India. These were nature gods, fierce and demanding. In time, perhaps under influences in India itself, they evolved. And the Vedas that guided worship of these gods also formed the foundation of the Hinduism still practiced in India today.

Hinduism and Early Indian Society

Our second set on India elaborates on what is depicted here. In this lesson, the basic ideas about the Hindu deities are summarized, along with a look at the caste system based upon those ideas.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Ancient India***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will appreciate India's rich and complex natural environment.
2. Students will better understand the key role the environment has played in shaping India's past.

India: The Natural Setting

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustrations 1A & 1B**

The Indian subcontinent is roughly the size of Europe. It is made up of several regions based on climate and terrain. The most striking feature is found along India's northern edge—the Himalayas, the highest mountain range in the world. The natural barrier formed by the Himalayas helped isolate India from the rest of the world. Illustration 1A is of Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, located north of India on the border between Nepal and Tibet. The mountains do not close off the northwest corner of the subcontinent. There, desert shades into what is now Pakistan and the flatter fertile area along the Indus River. Illustration 1B is a photo of this fertile area. It was here that India's oldest civilization flourished some 4000 years ago.

Illustration 2

The Indus River played a very important role in the earliest Indian civilization. But the most famous river in India is the Ganges. This 1835 drawing depicts trading boats on a distributory branch of the Ganges River where it filters through a huge delta into the Bay of Bengal. The Ganges arises in the Himalayas and drains the southern slopes of that massive mountain range. From there it carries rich soil to the plains south of the Himalayas. This rich soil, renewed each year by river flooding and the heavy monsoon rains in the summer, make these plains in the north among the most abundant agricultural areas in the world. While the monsoons are critical to ensuring a successful harvest, an excessive monsoon can spell disaster in the form of flooding.

Illustration 3

Southern India is a large triangular peninsula with a mountain range along the western coast, a flat eastern coast, and a large tableland plateau in the center of the subcontinent, called the Deccan Plateau. The Deccan is rocky but does contain areas of fertile soil. Parts of southern India are lush and tropical, as well as mountainous, as this 1938 tourism poster for the southern Indian state of Travancore suggests. In the past, the region was effectively cut off from the north by the Vindhya, a low but heavily forested mountain range in central India. Because of this, some of India's oldest cultures and traditions survived here more than in the north.

Lesson 1—India: The Natural Setting

Illustrations 1A & 1B

1A



The Granger Collection, New York

1B



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Discussing the Illustrations

1. India is a land of tremendous geographical variety, and geography has played a big part in the way India has developed. Illustration 1A shows the most famous of the huge mountains that run along much of India's northern border. What mountains are those?
2. Throughout its early history, the Himalayas helped protect India from outside invaders. How does this image especially make that dramatically clear?
3. Further west, desert and a flatter fertile area lie along a major river system. Illustration 1B is a photo taken in that area. Can you name the important river system found there? How does this photo help to show why such river systems were so important in the rise of the earliest civilizations?
4. Actually, the Indus River does not flow through present-day India. In what nation is the Indus River now located? Why is this area no longer considered part of India?

Follow-up Activities

1. The Himalayas are the highest mountain range in the world and form a large part of India's northern border. Actually, more of the Himalayas lie in the nation of Nepal. Learn more about the Himalayas and the people who live in the region. Create your own map of the Himalayas showing how much of it lies in India and how much in Nepal. Explain to the class what life is like in India and Nepal in and around these mountains.
2. **Small-group activity:** Pretend your group will lead the rest of the class on a ten-day tour of northern India, from present-day Pakistan to the Ganges River delta. The aim is to teach the class about the geographical factors that have affected the history of that region. Choose ten places to visit, one for each day. Try to find pictures of your ten "tour stops." Create a bulletin-board display that helps show the class what they will be seeing and why. Also, create a short tour guide the students can have with them on the "trip."