



SREENARAYANAGURU
OPEN UNIVERSITY

History of Early India: Selected Themes

Postgraduate Programme in
History



SELF LEARNING MATERIAL

COURSE CODE: M21HS03DC

SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

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To increase access of potential learners of all categories to higher education, research and training, and ensure equity through delivery of high quality processes and outcomes fostering inclusive educational empowerment for social advancement.

Mission

To be benchmarked as a model for conservation and dissemination of knowledge and skill on blended and virtual mode in education, training and research for normal, continuing, and adult learners.

Pathway

Access and Quality define Equity.

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Semester-I

**Master of Arts
History
Self Learning Material**



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Message from Vice Chancellor

Dear

I greet all of you with deep delight and great excitement. I welcome you to the Sreenarayanaguru Open University.

Sreenarayanaguru Open University was established in September 2020 as a state initiative for fostering higher education in open and distance mode. We shaped our dreams through a pathway defined by a dictum 'access and quality define equity'. It provides all reasons to us for the celebration of quality in the process of education. I am overwhelmed to let you know that we have resolved not to become ourselves a reason or cause a reason for the dissemination of inferior education. It sets the pace as well as the destination. The name of the University centers around the aura of Sreenarayanaguru, the great renaissance thinker of modern India. His name is a reminder for us to ensure quality in the delivery of all academic endeavors.

Sreenarayanaguru Open University rests on the practical framework of the popularly known "blended format". Learner on distance mode obviously has limitations in getting exposed to the full potential of classroom learning experience. Our pedagogical basket has three entities viz Self Learning Material, Classroom Counselling and Virtual modes. This combination is expected to provide high voltage in learning as well as teaching experiences. Care has been taken to ensure quality endeavours across all the entities.

The university is committed to provide you stimulating learning experience. The PG programme in History is expected to expose the learners to the intricacies of historian's craft through modules on historiography and historical methods. The learners will be trained on the skills for understanding historical forces enabling them to move further in to the complexities of historical narration in order to revisit history with the right perspective. The modules derived multi-disciplinary flavour due to their cross border penetration. We assure you that the university student support services will closely stay with you for the redressal of your grievances during your studentship.

Feel free to write to us about anything that seems relevant regarding the academic programme.

Wish you the best.



Regards,

Dr. P.M. Mubarak Pasha

01.03.2023

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Sources, Historical Construction and Geographical Setting

BLOCK-01



Sources for the Construction of Early History of India

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ◆ gain a thorough understanding of the past remains of Indian culture
- ◆ identify the various types of sources that give insight into the past
- ◆ find the gaps in the reconstruction of the historical past

Background

The study of history requires a careful examination and analysis of various sources in order to reconstruct the past. When it comes to understanding ancient Indian history, historians rely on a range of sources, including archaeological findings, inscriptions, numismatics, and literary sources. Archaeological sources play a vital role in providing tangible evidence of ancient settlements and the artefacts they used. These relics are scattered throughout different regions of the country, offering valuable insights into the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of ancient Indian societies. Archaeological sources, along with literary sources, were the main sources for the reconstruction of ancient history. However, the myths and legends must be dealt with cautiously while dealing with literary sources, as they often require careful scrutiny and corroboration with other forms of evidence. Numismatics, the study of coins, provided valuable information about trade, economic systems, and political structures of the time. Additionally, inscriptions began to appear centuries later, offering further valuable insights into historical events, rulers, and administrative practices. This unit focuses on the diverse range of sources used by historians to reconstruct ancient Indian history.

Keywords

Mounds, Megaliths, Radio-carbon dating, Numismatics, Epigraphy, *Brahmi* script, *Kharosthi* script, *Kilkkanakku*, *Melkkanakku*



Discussion

1.1.1 Archaeological Sources

- ◆ *Single-culture, major-culture and multi-culture mounds*

A vast range of material remains that belong to the ancient period are found in our country. It is classified into three types: single-culture, major-culture, and multi-culture. Single-culture mounds represent only one culture. Some mounds represent the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) culture, the Kushan culture, and the Satavahana culture. When one culture is dominant and other cultures are secondary, they are referred to as major-culture mounds. Multi-culture mounds contain different cultures in succession. They occasionally overlap with one another.

- ◆ *Vertical and Horizontal excavation*

Various successive layers of the material and other aspects of a culture can be understood from an excavated mound. Vertical excavation reveals the total stratigraphy of the sites. The entire cultural deposits of a site are exposed through it. A perfect chronological order of material culture can be pictured from those sites that are excavated vertically. Horizontal excavation reveals the extension of the site while presenting a stratigraphic record. Horizontal excavations are more expensive and very few. It does not give a complete or adequate picture of the material life in various places in the ancient history of India. The remains of the earlier period have been preserved in the mounds in different propositions. These material remains are seen preserved in a better position in the dry arid climate of western UP, Rajasthan, and north-western India when compared to the humid and moist climate of the middle Gangetic plains and deltaic region.

- ◆ *Material culture sprang up in Gangetic plains*
- ◆ *Megalithic burials found in South India*

Excavations in Baluchistan have revealed villages that existed around 6000 BCE. Additionally, there have also been discoveries of the material culture that emerged in the Gangetic plains during the second millennium BCE. It can be used to determine the layout of their settlements, the type of pottery they used, the type of cereals they ate, and the tools and implements they used. In South India, numerous megalithic graves have been discovered, on which, along with the dead, their tools, weapons, pottery and other belongings were placed and encircled by large pieces of stone. The Megaliths aid in our understanding of life in the Deccan during the Iron Age.



- ◆ *Radiocarbon dating,*
- ◆ *Pollen analysis*

Different techniques are used to date the historical artefacts. The most significant of them all is radiocarbon dating. The amount of Carbon-14 within a plant or animal starts to degrade when it dies. It takes about 5730 years for half of the C-14 to decay and another same number of years for the next half to decay, and so on. This period is known as the half-life period of radiocarbon. Thus by measuring the amount of C-14 originally present and that is now present, the age of a dead organism can be calculated. Pollen analysis and an examination of the plant residues give details of the history of climate and vegetation. On the basis of this evidence, it is hypothesised that agriculture was practised in Rajasthan and Kashmir around 7000-6000 BCE. The mines from which the metal artefacts were extracted were identified after scientific analysis of the collected artefacts. The various stages of technological development are then calculated. To determine whether the obtained animal bones were domesticated, it is examined scientifically.

- ◆ *Geological studies*

Geological studies are more useful for finding the history of soils and rocks. This is more useful for the study of the prehistoric period. Biological studies provide evidence of the history of plants and animals that keep changing slowly. Human history is always the story of the continuing interaction between people and the environment. The progress that mankind achieved in the field of biological and geological science provides new vistas into the avenues of prehistory and history. Along with archaeology, geological and biological research are essential for comprehending a significant portion of the ancient era, beginning with the origin of the world.

- ◆ *Antiquities found in the Harappan sites*

Different stages of Harappan culture appear in mounds which do not possess the remains of other cultures. The Harappan sites are found in Pakistan, Punjab, Haryana, Western UP and also in certain regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. This culture is identified by its red pottery, a form of writing, bronze tools and seals. These remains allude to the urban life followed by the people. Numerous antiquities found in the neighbourhood of Harappa and in distant places show the nature of trade carried by them at that time. Small and massive structures both show social stratification. The wealthy population resided in the larger structures, while the average people lived in humble two-room homes. The prevalence of phallic symbols indicates that fertility cults were popular.

◆ PGW culture and sites

A new type of material culture and a new type of settlement is found in Punjab, Haryana, western UP and Rajasthan, dated around c.1000 BCE. This culture is identified by a new type of pottery called Painted Grey Ware. The excavations at the PGW sites at Atranjikhhera and Hastinapur have shown evidence of rice, wheat and other cereals. Their settlements were much smaller than that of the Harappans. The tools and other material remains obtained from PGW sites do not show much social stratification. This culture came to an end around 400 BCE, although social and economic life associated with it continued in later times.

◆ NBPW culture
◆ Urbanisation in the middle Ganga plains

A new type of culture emerged in the plains of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar around 600 BCE. It was marked by the appearance of Northern Black Polished Ware pottery. The use of burnt bricks started about 550 BCE in the middle of Gangetic plains though it became common only a century later. The use of iron tools and polished pottery was the peculiarity of NBPW sites. It also saw the beginning of urbanisation in the middle Ganga plains. Numerous locations mentioned in the Buddhist Pali texts have been excavated and exhibit signs of human habitation before the Mauryan period.

1.1.2 Literary Sources

◆ Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads, as literary sources

The ancient manuscripts of India are not older than the fourth century CE, though Indians had developed the system of writing as early as 2500 BCE. Old Sanskrit manuscripts are found in different parts of India, but they are mostly related to South India, Kashmir and Nepal. They are mainly religious in nature. The Vedas, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the Puranas and similar ones belong to this category. They reflect the social and religious conditions of ancient India, but they cannot be used to make precise references of time and location. The *Rigveda* is the oldest Vedic text and is usually assigned to the period around c.1500-1000 BCE, and the other Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads, are dated later than that. The *Rigveda* is a collection of prayers, and the later Vedic texts contain both prayers, rituals and magic. But there are many interpolations in the Vedic texts which should be considered while reconstructing history from them. The *Rigveda*'s first and tenth books date from a much later era and may possibly reflect the circumstances of later Vedic times. Numerous rituals are found in later Vedic texts in addition to hymns. The magical charms and spells



and non -Vedic cultural elements are found in *Atharva Veda*. *Sama Veda* is a book that deals with music. The *Yajurveda* is a collection of numerous rituals which are explained in detail in *Brahmanas*. The *Upanishads* deal with philosophical speculations.

- ◆ The Vedangas and their composition period

The *Vedangas* are the auxiliary texts to the *Vedas*. The literal meaning of *Vedanga* is 'limbs of a Veda'. It covers phonetics (*Shiksha*), metre (*Chanda*), grammar (*Vyakarana*), etymology (*Nirukta*), ritual (*Kalpa*), and astronomy (*Jyotisha*). The *Vedanga* literature was composed during the period of approximately 600-200 BCE. One notable work from this time period is Yaska's *Nirukta*, which focuses on the etymology of words in the *Rig Veda* and dates back to the 6th century BCE.

- ◆ Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*
- ◆ The final compilation of *Mahabharata*

Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, written around 450 BCE, is the greatest work of grammar written in ancient India. The social, economic and cultural conditions of his time are truly reflected in his work. The final compilation of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* might have been around 400 CE. Vyasa's *Mahabharata* is considered to be older than *Ramayana* and possibly reflects the state of affairs from the tenth century BCE to the fourth century CE. Originally it was called *Jayasamhita* and comprised 8800 verses which were later increased to 24000 verses. It came to be called *Bharata* as it contains the stories of the descendants of Bharata, one of the earliest Vedic tribes. After the final compilation, the number of verses increased to 100,000 and came to be known as the *Mahabharata*. The main theme is the conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas, which relate to the later-Vedic period. The epic consists of narrative, descriptive and didactic portions. The narrative section is filled with mythical tales, making it challenging to extrapolate historical events from it. The didactic section generally refers to the post-Mauryan and post-Gupta periods, while the descriptive section deals with the post-Vedic era.

- ◆ Composition of *Ramayana*
- ◆ *Srautasutras*, *Grihyasutras* and *Sulvasutras* and their content

The *Ramayana* was written by Valmiki and originally consisted of 6000 verses which were later increased to 12,000 and to 24,000. Its composition started around the 5th century BCE, and it passed through several phases, and the final stage of composition might have been around the 12th century CE. It can be inferred that *Ramayana* was composed in an age after the *Mahabharata*. The *Shrautasutras*, *Grihyasutras* and *Sulvasutras* belong to the post- Vedic period. *Shrautasutras* refers to the various royal sacrifices. *Grihyasutras* deal

with domestic rituals. The beginnings of geometrical and mathematical calculations are found in *Sulvasutras*.

- ◆ Buddhist texts in the Pali language- *Sutta Pitaka*, *Vinaya Pitaka*, and *Abhidhamma Pitaka*

The Buddhist texts were written in the Pali language, a form of Prakrit. The canonical and non-canonical literature provides a wealth of information about the social and economic conditions of the time. The life of Buddha, information about his contemporary kings, and political events of the period are also pictured clearly through them. Though they were compiled in Sri Lanka in the first century BCE, they unveil the state of affairs in India from the fifth to the second century BCE. The Buddhist texts written in Pali are divided into three categories, *Sutta Pitaka*, *Vinaya Pitaka* and *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. The *Sutta Pitaka* contain five bodies of collections called the *Nikayas*. Among them, the *Digha Nikaya* contains details about farming and trade. They are significant from the perspective of the social and economic history of ancient India.

- ◆ The significance of Jataka stories
- ◆ Commentaries of Buddhaghosha and *Dhammapada*

The *Jataka* stories are about the previous birth of Buddha and give glimpses of society and trade around 200 BCE or a little earlier than that. The relief works at Bharhut and Sanchi, whose date is fixed around 200 BCE, have jataka stories depicted there. The *Vinaya Pitaka* shows the nature of the relations of monks and nuns with other people and among themselves. They were not allowed to lead a luxurious life and were required to lead a plain life through begging. The *Suttas* or Buddhist doctrines are detailed in *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, which throws light on the social outlook of the Buddhists. The commentaries of *Buddhaghosha* and *Dhammapada* on the ancient pali texts throw light on the changing social and economic conditions in the fifth-century CE.

The sacred books of the Jainas, known as *Siddhanta* or *Agama*, offer valuable insights into the history, doctrines, and cultural aspects of Jainism. They are written in Ardha-Magadhi, an eastern Prakrit dialect and are divided between the two major schools of Jainism: Shvetambara and Digambara. The Shvetambara canon includes texts like the 12 *Angas*, 12 *Upangas*, 10 *Painnas*, 6 *Cheya Suttas*, 4 *Mula Suttas*, and individual works such as the *Nandi Sutta* and *Anugodara*. Digambaras give importance to the *Angas* and have their own texts called *Angabahyas*. Non-canonical Jain works exist in Maharashtri and Sanskrit. Commentaries are in Maharashtri and Prakrit, while later Sanskrit texts include



◆ Jaina literature

Tikas, *Vrittis*, and *Avachurnis*. Genealogical lists in Jaina *Pattavalis* and *Theravalis* provide details on Jaina saints but sometimes contradict each other. Jaina Puranas, or *Charitas* in Shvetambara tradition, are hagiographies of *tirthankaras* and include other material. Notable works are the *Adi Purana*, *Harivamsha Purana*, *Trishashtilakshana Mahapurana*, *Parishishtaparvan*, and *Prabandhas* from Gujarat. Jaina texts encompass hymns, poetry, and didactic stories, providing insights into Jainism and cultural history. They shed light on the history of Jainism, doctrines, lives of Saints, and the monastic community. However, they are less studied by historians compared to Buddhist sources.

◆ Throws light on the social and economic conditions of the time

◆ Two groups of Sangam literature

The ancient Tamil texts or the Sangam literature also indicate the social and economic conditions of south India in the early centuries of the Common Era. The Sangam was an assembly of Tamil poets held under the patronage of Pandyan kings at Madurai. It is believed that there were three sangams which lasted for 9990 years, including 8898 poets and 197 Pandyan Kings as their patrons. The major portions of Sangam literature seem to be compiled between 300-600 CE. It is divided into two groups- the narrative and the didactic. The narrative texts known as *Melkanakku* are eighteen major texts, and the didactic texts called *kilkanakku* are eighteen minor texts. They help us to identify the main stages in the development of Tamil society. The narrative portion refers to the trade activities, administration of justice, agricultural practices, towns etc. The didactic portion lays down the code of conduct for the king and various social and professional groups. The *Tolkappiyam*, written by Tolkappiyar, is the earliest text in Tamil grammar. The twin epics called *Silappathikaram* and *Manimekhalai* picture the social and political conditions in Tamil society in the sixth century CE.

◆ Secular literature

◆ Early legal writings

Other than religious literature, secular literature is also extremely important. The law books or the *Dharmasutras*, *Smritis*, *Tika* and *Nibandha*, together with their commentaries called *Dharmashastras*, belong to this category. It is the different categories of early legal writings. The duties to be performed by the various sections of the society, the ruling classes, officials, rules of marriage inheritance, punishments, laws relating to guilds, merchants, artisans, money lenders and the like are mentioned in them. The *Dharmasutras* belong to the period between 500-200 BCE, and the *Smritis* took their present form in the first six centuries of the Common era. The



Dharmasutras are generally written in prose, although some of them also contain verses.

The *Smritis* are written in verse and include new topics that are not found in the earliest law books. The oldest, the *Manusmriti*, is placed in the second century BCE and certain chapters belong to the fifth century CE. It places *Brahmanas* on a high pedestal in society and Sudras and women on a very low status. It is important for the study of the proliferation of castes and the study of the history of the family. The law books of Yajnavalkya, Narada, Brihaspati and Katyayana are considered to be important in the Gupta period. All these *smritis* prescribe privileges for the *Brahmanas*, laws of inheritance, rituals and social status of different castes, problems of purity and pollution, social regulations to be enforced by the state and society, various types of penances etc. Several commentaries and digests were written on them between the seventh and the eighteenth centuries.

- ◆ Law books of Manu, Yajnavalkya, Narada, Brihaspati and Katayayana



Many *Grihyasutras* are important for the study of the social and economic life of the period from 500-200 BCE. They were composed mainly by Kathaka, Gobhila, Baudhayana and Parasara, which describe the domestic rituals from birth to death. The *Puranas* are eighteen in number. Of these, Vishnu, Brahmanda, Bhagavata, Vayu, Matsya and Bhavisya are considered older than others. All the information regarding society, religion, geography, genealogy, astrology and many other subjects are provided in them. The compilers of the *Puranas* were aware of the concept of change. They described four epochs consisting of *Krita*, *Treta*, *Dwapara* and *Kali* and each succeeding one was considered worse than the preceding one. The moral standard and social values were said to be degenerating with the passage of time. Like the *Dharmasutras* and *Grihyasutras*, the *Arthashastra* was also compiled in prose, and the verses contained in some portions might be interpolations. The second, third and fifth books of this text belong to the Mauryan period, and the remaining portions reflect the state of affairs in post-Mauryan times. It is the most important ancient treatise on statecraft. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya contains considerable material on the social and economic history of the ancient period.

- ◆ Grihyasutras
- ◆ Arthashastra of Kautilya
- ◆ Puranas



A few semi-biographical texts are found around the sixth century, which throw light on the nature of feudal hierarchy and court life. The *Harshacharita*, written by Banabhatta, gives an account of the early life of Harshavardhana. The feudal aspects of society and other elements of social and



◆ Semi-
biographical
works

religious life can be found in it. The *Vikramankadevacharita* of Bilhana records the achievements of Chalukyan King Vikramaditya VI in the eleventh century. *Ramacharita* of Sandhyakaranandi gives details of the revolt of Kaivarta peasants against the Pala king Ramapala in the twelfth century. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* records the exploits of Kashmir kings. Although written in the twelfth century, it contains details of the social and political history of Kashmir from the seventh century onwards. Apart from these, several dramas and kavyas can be used for the reconstruction of social and economic life. Bhasa's dramas attributed to post-Mauryan times reflect the contemporary social conditions. *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, *Meghaduta* and *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidasa describe the social, economic and political conditions of the Gupta period. Sudraka's *Mrichchakadika* and Vishakadhatta's *Mudrarakshasa* provide details about the social conditions of Gupta and post-Gupta times. Glimpses of the social life of Deccan and South India are found in *Dasakumaracharita*, written by Dandin in the seventh century. The works of Magha, Bharavi and Rajasekhara are also useful in this regard.

◆ Reconstruction
of the economic
history of the
Gupta period

Brihatsamhita of Varahamihra is used for the construction of the economic history of the Gupta period. Details about agricultural practices and rules regarding the construction of houses of different varnas and different grades of dignitaries are found here. It shows a clear distinction between various social groups and functionaries. The *Amarakosa*, written by Amarasingha, throws light on the social and economic conditions of the Gupta period. The urban life and position of women are well portrayed in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*. The comfortable life of the rich people in cities is evidenced through it.

1.1.2.1 Foreign Accounts

The information obtained from literary sources, archaeology, coins and inscriptions is supplemented by foreign accounts. Several Greek, Roman and Chinese travellers have left their accounts of India. When Alexander the Great came to India, some foreign travellers came along with him, and some others followed him afterwards. The Greek ambassador Megasthenes came to the court of Chandragupta Maurya and wrote *Indica*. Though the original work is lost, it has been reconstructed from the works of later writers who used to quote him in their writings. He has provided valuable

◆ *Accounts of
Greek Travellers*

information regarding several castes, economic activities and urban organisation under the Mauryas. The social structure described by him does not exactly correspond with the varna system of the ancient period.

◆ *Accounts of
Roman travellers*

Several Roman authors have given detailed accounts of the import and export trade between Rome and India in the first and second centuries CE. Ptolemy wrote the work *Geography* in the first century CE. This text gives information about the geography of the country, important places on the eastern and western coast of India from the mouth of the Indus to that of the Ganges, and types of settlements in the Indus Valley and the neighbouring regions. *The Periplus of Erythrean Sea* was written by an anonymous author in 150 CE. It gives a long list of the articles that were in great demand at the Indian ports for import and export. The Indo-Roman trade is vividly described in the *Natural History* of Pliny. He laments that Romans suffered heavily in the trade with India, and her gold was completely drained from Rome to India. The papyrus records found from Egypt attest to his above statement though there are exaggerations in his accounts.

◆ *Accounts
of Chinese
travellers*

Fa Hien came to India during the Gupta period and stayed in India from 399-414 CE. He gives an account of the social and economic conditions of Gupta times and throws light on the religious and cultural conditions also. It was during the period of Harshavardhana, Hsuan Tsang came to India. He portrays the social and religious conditions of India in the second half of the seventh century, especially the condition of Buddhist monasteries, Brahmanical establishments, the decline of the towns associated with Buddhism etc. When the Tang dynasty ruled China during the seventh and eighth centuries, many Chinese monks came to India in quest of knowledge of Buddhism. Biographies of these monks provide valuable information about India in early medieval times. The writers of foreign accounts have given valuable information about India, but at times prejudices have also crept in.

1.1.3 Epigraphical Sources

The study of inscriptions is called epigraphy. Inscriptions are more significant than coins for the study of social conditions of the past. They were carved on rocks, stone pillars, seals, copper plates, wooden tablets, temple walls, bricks, images etc. The earliest inscriptions in our country



- ◆ *Epigraphy or the study of inscriptions*
- ◆ *Use of Prakrit and Sanskrit language*

were recorded in stone. Copper plates began to be used for engraving inscriptions in the early centuries of the Common Era. At that time also, stone inscriptions continued to be used in South India on a large scale. The temple walls of south India contain a wide range of inscriptions. The earliest inscriptions were written in Prakrit in the third century BCE. Only in the second century CE, Sanskrit was used as the medium in inscriptions, and it began to be used widely. Even at that time, Prakrit continued to be used in the inscriptions. Regional languages were used in the inscriptions in the ninth and tenth centuries.

- ◆ *Undeciphered Harappan script*
- ◆ *Scripts used in Ashokan inscriptions*

The earliest inscriptions of India belong to the Harappan period. They are yet to be deciphered. They seem to have been written in the pictographic mode in which ideas and objects were expressed in the form of pictures. The symbols used in the Harappan script are found among both the Mundas and Dravidians. During the Mauryan period, the Ashokan inscriptions were written mainly in Brahmi and also in Kharoshti script. Brahmi was written from left to right, and Kharoshti from right to left. Except for northwestern India, where the Kharoshti script prevailed, Brahmi was the dominant one in other regions. In Pakistan and Afghanistan areas, Greek and Aramaic were used in the Ashokan inscriptions there. It is seen that Brahmi continued to be the main script till the end of the Gupta period. In the later period, strong regional variations are noticed in this script. Till now, the earliest accepted deciphered inscriptions of Indian history are Iranian. They are identified to be belonging to the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. They are in the old Indo- Iranian language and in Semitic languages. The Iranian conquest of the Sindhu area is mentioned in them.

- ◆ *Types of Ashokan inscriptions*

In India, the earliest deciphered inscriptions are the Ashoka inscriptions. It was deciphered by James Prinsep in 1837. Earlier, Firoz Shah Tughlaq had brought two Ashoka pillars to Delhi from Maski and Topra. But his efforts to decipher it were not a success. The Ashokan inscriptions are categorized into different types such as Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, Separate Rock Edicts, Major Pillar Edicts, and Minor Pillar Edicts. Ashoka's achievements and Mauryan's past is revealed through these inscriptions, mainly written in the Brahmi script and Prakrit language, belonging to the third century BCE. They are found in the form of royal orders issued by a King to his subjects with paternal care. They stress the need for mutual respect, obedience to parents, *sramanas* and

Brahmanas, affection to slaves and hired labours, respect for all religions and promoting harmonious relations between different classes. The administrative affairs are mentioned in them, but in general, lack economic content. The Ashoka's pillars on which the inscriptions were inscribed were made of sandstone and were transported from Chunar in Mirzapur to different parts of the country. There is a reference to the reduction of the royal tax in Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha. So it can be inferred that the royal tax might have been much higher than that.

- ◆ *Inscriptions in post-Mauryan and Gupta periods*
- ◆ *Reference about merchants, artisans and guilds*



The inscriptions belonging to the post-Maurya and Gupta periods fall into two categories - official and private. The private inscriptions are mainly in the form of donations, which provides the details of the donor, donee and also the articles that are transferred. Many inscriptions that bear the name of merchants and artisans are found in large numbers from Mathura, Sanchi, Gaya, Barhut and Nasik. The gift of coins is also mentioned in the inscriptions. It is evident from the Nasik cave inscription that the Satavahana queen Nayanika has made a donation of about 1,50,000 *karsapanas*. There is also a reference to the guilds, towns, various occupations and currency in the inscriptions. It shows that merchants and artisans played an important role in society. There is also a reference to Buddhist nuns who joined the order after leaving their families and about the gifts made by them to the Buddhist order. The Satavahana inscriptions contain the name of the king's mother, which shows that it was not a patriarchal-dominated society. The Nasik cave inscription mentions sacrifices performed by Queen Nayanika also supports this. The Satavahana king Gautamiputra Satakarni is claimed in the inscriptions as the destroyer of the pride of *Kshatriyas* and who put an end to the mixture of four varnas. Thus it tells us about the varna system and position of women. Other inscriptions about social, economic and religious affairs have also been discovered. A lot of inscriptions as marks of devotion have been found on pillars, temples and tablets.

Various eulogies of Kings and conquerors described their achievements but do not speak about their shortcomings. The Hathigumbha inscription of King Kharavela of Kalinga is the earliest in this category, who ruled in the first century BCE. It gives details about the events of his reign year-wise, his donations and relations with rural and urban people and the construction of a canal in Kalinganagara. The Junagarh

◆ *Eulogies in inscriptions*

inscription of Saka King Rudradaman in 150 CE is a pure eulogy. Samudragupta's Allahabad *prasasti*, composed by his court poet Harisena, is also the best example. It sheds light on the nature of the relationship between the king and the vassals, social and administrative conditions etc. In addition, several donations made by rulers, merchants, artisans and common people are also found. The Mehrauli iron pillar inscription of Chandragupta Vikramaditya and the Bhitari pillar inscription of Skandagupta gives information about the Guptas.

◆ *Land grant inscriptions*

Land grant inscriptions are very helpful for studying land patterns and administrative systems. These type of inscriptions began under the Satavahanas, and by the time of the Guptas, it was found in major parts of the country. The land system, taxes and agrarian relations of the Gupta and post-Gupta periods are gleaned from them. They give us the details regarding the type of land, the form of revenue to be levied and the various categories of people it was made. Inscriptions in Prakrit, Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil have also been found. The Lahore Copper Seal inscription of the fourth century CE refers to King Maheswara Naga of the Naga dynasty.

◆ *Numismatics, or the study of coins*

Numismatics, or the study of coins, is another important source for reconstructing the past. Coins were the main medium of exchange and not paper currency. They were made of various types of metals - gold, silver, copper and lead. A large number of clay moulds for making coins have been discovered. These coins mainly belong to the first three centuries of the Common Era. In the post - Gupta period, such moulds almost disappeared.

◆ *Use of metal money in ancient India*

Numismatic evidence plays an important role in the reconstruction of social and economic history. Though many seals have been found in the Indus Valley, there is no evidence of the use of coined money. It was around 500 BCE, and the use of metal money started in ancient India. The earliest punch-marked coins were made of silver and cast coins of copper were found in post-Mauryan times. This shows that trade and commerce had developed considerably in ancient India, and exchange was mainly through coined money rather than a barter system. It gives details about the commodity distribution, revenue collection and payment to the state and various employees. Merchants and goldsmiths

also issued coins with the permission of rulers. It was the use of coins that promoted commerce in northern India from c.500 BCE.

◆ *Coins issued during post-Mauryan period*

A large number of coins were issued during the post-Mauryan period by various dynasties, guilds and towns. The coins issued by the Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Kushans and Satavahanas bear the name of their kings. Gold coins were issued on a large scale by the Kushans. The Satavahanas issued coins of lead, copper and potin. The representation of boats in their coins points to the trade by sea. In peninsular India, many Roman gold and silver coins were found. Many ancient cities also issued coins between 200 BCE and 300 CE. This was a main source for reconstructing the history of several dynasties of the past. This can be noticed mainly in the case of Indo-Greeks who came to India from Afghanistan and established their rule in the second and first centuries BCE and also the Kushan coins.

◆ *Depictions on the coins*

The images of kings and gods are also found in the coins. The Gupta king, Samudragupta, issued coins of as many as eight different types, all of pure gold. He is seen as playing the flute in the coins. The representation of horses in the Kushan and Gupta coins shows the importance of transport. The worship of Shiva and Vishnu is also evident in the Kushan coins. The fire altars found in the coins are proof of the Iranian type of worship in northern India. The coins of Chandragupta II indicate his personal religion of Vaishnavism. The Gupta silver coinage was inaugurated by him as the result of his conquests of the western Kshatrapa territories. Kumaragupta issued the largest number of coins and the various points to the vast extent of the territories within which the various types of coins were in circulation.

◆ *Gold coins issued by Guptas*

The economic history of India is highly enriched by the discovery of coins, which were used as a medium of exchange and a mode of payment. The largest number of gold coins were issued by the Guptas showing that there was flourishing trade in post-Mauryan and pre-Gupta times. Even the guilds were permitted by rulers to issue coins. This might be due to the prominence of craft and commerce in the ancient period. Religious symbols and figures of gods and goddesses also appear in the coins. It throws light on the artistic and religious history of the time. Trade was always fostered by the use of coins. There might have been a decline in the trade and commerce of the post-Gupta period since



only a few coins have been found from this period. Cowries have been found in large numbers in this period. Though they were also used as coins, their purchasing power was low. Imitations of Gupta coins are later found in parts of eastern India, but they are very few. Long-distance trade and heavy transactions might have suffered during these periods.

◆ *Hoard of foreign and indigenous coins*

Archaeological findings also corroborate this view. As there was no banking system in the modern sense during the ancient period, money was stored in earthenware and brass vessels. They were maintained as precious hoards on which people could rely in times of need. Both Indian and foreign coins were kept in these hoards. Those unearthed hoards of coins are preserved in museums in Kolkata, Patna, Lucknow, Delhi, Jaipur, Mumbai and Chennai. Many foreign countries also accommodate Indian coins. The government has catalogued and published coins from significant dynasties. However, there are still many coins that need to be organised and published.

Summarised Overview

There are various sources available for reconstructing the history of past events-archaeological findings, inscriptions, numismatics, and literary sources. These sources shed light on the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of history. Various archaeological sources and methods of dating the material remains found in India, ranging from single-culture, major-culture, and multi-culture mounds to megalithic burials, as well as the stratigraphic record obtained from vertical and horizontal excavations. Biological and geological studies help to understand the prehistoric and historic periods. The Harappan culture was identified by red pottery, writing, bronze tools and seals, with evidence of urban life and trade. The Painted Grey Ware Culture emerged around 1000 BCE, characterized by smaller settlements and less social stratification. The Northern Black Polished Ware Culture emerged around 600 BCE and is identified with the use of burnt bricks and iron tools. Also, it marks the beginning of urbanization in the middle Ganga plains.

While considering literary sources, ancient manuscripts of India, including old Sanskrit manuscripts, which are mainly religious in nature, are found in different parts of India but are mostly related to South India, Kashmir and Nepal. The Vedas, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the Puranas and similar texts belong to this category, but they cannot be used precisely with reference to time and place. The *Rigveda*, the oldest vedic text, is a collection of prayers, and the later vedic

texts contain both prayers, rituals and magic. But there are many interpolations in the vedic texts which should be considered while reconstructing history from them. The Buddhist texts, written in the Pali language, provide information about the social and economic conditions of India from the fifth to the second century BCE. The *Jataka* stories, *Vinaya Pitaka*, and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* are all important Buddhist texts.

The Sangam literature provides insight into South Indian society during the early centuries of the Common era, with its narrative and didactic texts. Then, the secular literature of ancient India, such as the *Dharmasutras* and *Smritis*, provides information about the duties and laws of different sections of society. The Puranas, semi-biographical texts, dramas, and kavyas can also be used to reconstruct social and economic life. Foreign travellers, including Greek, Roman and Chinese explorers, have left accounts of India that provide valuable information on the social, economic and cultural conditions of different historical periods. The accounts of these travellers also reveal the extensive trade networks between India and other countries, including Rome and China. However, some of these accounts may contain prejudices or exaggerations.

Numismatics, the study of coins, is a valuable source for reconstructing the past, particularly social and economic history. Coinage was the main medium of exchange in ancient India, with various types of metal used to create them. Coins were issued by guilds, and cities, depicting kings, gods, and symbols, providing insight into the history and culture of the time.

The study of inscriptions is called epigraphy. Inscriptions are important for understanding the social conditions of the past and were carved on various surfaces such as rocks, stone pillars, seals, copper plates, wooden tablets, temple walls, bricks, and images. The earliest deciphered inscriptions in India are the Ashoka inscriptions, which were mainly written in Brahmi script and Prakrit language and belong to the third century BCE. The inscriptions of the post-Mauryan and Gupta periods are categorised as official and private and provide pieces of information about merchants, artisans, guilds, towns, occupations, currency, and the position of women.

Self Assessment

1. Which are the auxiliary texts of Vedas?
2. Which texts describe the domestic rituals from birth to death?
3. Which dynasty issued the largest number of gold coins in ancient India?
4. What is archaeology?
5. Which Satavahana king is described as the destroyer of the pride of *Kshatriyas*?



6. What is Numismatics?
7. What is Epigraphy?
8. Which culture is identified with the beginning of urbanisation in the middle Gangetic plains?

Assignments

1. Examine how far the archaeological sources are helpful in reconstructing ancient Indian history.
2. Write a note on the literary sources of ancient Indian history.
3. Examine the historical pertinence of Buddhist literature
4. Analyse the significance of numismatics as sources to reconstruct history.
5. Discuss the main epigraphical sources of ancient India.
6. Critically examine the historical value of foreign accounts.

Suggested Readings

1. Kosambi, D.D., *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Book Depot Bombay, 1956.
2. Sharma, R.S, *Aspect of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass Publication, New Delhi, 1991.
3. Sharma, R.S, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, Macmillan India, 2007.
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4. Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*, Pearson, New Delhi, 2009.
5. Vincent A Smith, *The Early History of India*, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1999.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

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Historical Sense of Ancient Indians

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ◆ unveil the historical sense of Indians in the ancient period
- ◆ identify the stages of social evolution in India through the historical remains
- ◆ unravel the historicity of the ancient Indian texts

Background

The study of history is an integral part of understanding the development and progress of human civilization. It is commonly believed that ancient Indians did not possess a sense of history, unlike the ancient Greeks, who compiled historical records in a systematic manner. In this unit, we delve into the understanding of history among the people of ancient India. The *Puranas*, a collection of eighteen texts, are the earliest source of Indian history and provide insights into events up until the beginning of Gupta rule. In addition, biographical writings such as the *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta and the *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana reflect a sense of historicity in ancient India. The unit also highlights the importance of archaeological excavations in shedding light on the social and economic contributions to our understanding of ancient India. Overall, this unit provides a comprehensive overview of the historical sense and sources of history in ancient India.

Keywords

Puranas, Harshacharita, Ramacharita, Vikramankadevacharita, Dharmasutras, Smritis, Guilds



Discussion

1.2.1 Nature of Historical Sense of Ancient Indians

- ◆ *Puranas - Earliest source of Indian history*
- ◆ *The four ages of mankind*

It is often said that ancient Indians did not display a sense of history. When compared to the ancient Greeks, they did not compile history in such a manner. Our earliest source of history is the *Puranas* which are eighteen in number. Details till the beginning of Gupta rule can be gleaned from them. When the events are described, their causes and effects are discussed sometimes as also their place of occurrence. The four ages of mankind are depicted in it. They are *krita*, *treta*, *dwapara* and *kaliyuga*.

- ◆ *Saka era, Vikrama era and Gupta era*

Time and place are the two powerful aspects of history. It is said that *Dharma* becomes *adharma* and vice versa in accordance with changes in time and place. In ancient India, several eras were begun, and events were recorded in accordance with it. The Vikrama era began in 57-58 BCE, the Saka era in 78 CE, and the Gupta era in 320 CE. In the inscriptions, time and place are mentioned with regard to each event. A remote sense of historicity can be seen in the Asokan inscriptions of the third century BCE. The events of Asoka's period from the eighth to the twenty-seventh regnal year are recorded in the inscriptions.

1.2.2 Historical Texts

- ◆ *Sense of historicity in the biographical works*

A strong historical sense of the Indians can be seen in biographical writings. An illustrated example of this is the *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta, written in the seventh century. It is a semi-biographical work written in an ornate style which became the despair of later imitators. The early career of Harshavardhana is depicted in it. A high element of exaggeration is there in this work, but the court life of Harsha and the social and religious situation of that period is presented. Various other biographies were also written in the subsequent periods. *Ramacharita*, written by Sandhyakar Nandi in the twelfth century, depicts the victory of Pala prince Ramapala in his conflict with the Kaivarta peasants. The achievements of Vikramaditya VI (1076-1127), the Chalukya King of Kalyan, are portrayed in *Vikramankadevacharita* of Bilhana. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw the compilation of some biographies of merchants of Gujarat. In the case of South India, only one work called *Mushikavamsa*,

composed in the 11th century by Atula, was discovered. This is the dynastic history of Mushikas, who ruled the northern part of Kerala. Similar works may have been written in South India, but so far not been found. The *Rajatarangini*, or 'The Stream of Kings' written by Kalhana in the twelfth century, is an illustration of early historical writing. It is a sequence of the biographies of the kings of Kashmir and can be considered a fine example of historical writing in the modern sense.

◆ *Excavations of archaeological sites*

Though a number of sites belonging to the prehistoric, protohistoric, and historical periods have been excavated and explored, they did not yield any valuable results to be placed in the mainstream of the ancient India. The results of prehistoric and protohistoric archaeology need to be analysed to get a true picture of the different stages of social evolution in India. In India, around 200 sites that have been excavated are related to the ancient historical period. Still, they have not been properly discussed as to their contribution to the study of the social, economic and cultural trends in the ancient period. This is a field which requires adequate attention in the context of both ancient rural and urban India. Till now, the importance of largely Buddhist and certain Brahmanical sites has been brought to light, but social and economic changes should also be seen in relation to religious history.

◆ *Archaeological excavations on the sites mentioned in literary sources*

It is mainly on the basis of both indigenous and foreign literary sources ancient history has been so far constructed. Coins and inscriptions are also used. It is high time to adopt new techniques for constructing history from various sources. The date and time of the literary sources should be more critically examined. It is better to examine such texts in the purview of archaeological evidence. In the beginning, archaeologists mainly pursued excavations in connection with the Brahmanical and Buddhist sites mentioned in the texts. This was very helpful for enriching historical knowledge, though the excavations did not always match the literary sources. For example, the archaeological evidence from the Gandhara grave culture on the use of horses and the cremation of the dead in the second millennium BCE should be analysed for the study of RigVedic culture. The Painted Grey Ware Culture and other archaeological finds should be correlated with the Later Vedic Age. Similarly, early Pali texts have to be related to the Northern Black Polished Ware archaeology. In the case of South India, the details provided by the Sangam texts also need to be correlated with that inferred from the megalithic remains and inscriptions.



- ◆ Importance of archaeological data
- ◆ Contradictions between literary sources and archaeological evidence

Puranas give a long list of family histories. But it should be the archaeological data that must be considered as more important. King Rama of Ayodhya is dated around 2000 BCE in the Puranas, though the explorations and digging in and around Ayodhya do not show any settlement around that date. The character of Krishna is attributed prime position in *Mahabharata*. Still, the available inscriptions and sculptures from Mathura two centuries before and after the beginning of the Common era do not corroborate it. Different stages of social evolution in both epics are detected. One thing has to be taken into consideration, ie, it is not the description of a particular phase of social evolution. It had been edited several times before it took its present shape. Literary sources and epigraphical evidence place Gautama Buddha and Vardhamana Mahavira in the sixth century BCE, but the cities they visited are generally dated to around 400 BCE. In such cases, the usually accepted dates of these personalities need to be reconsidered.

- ◆ Royal inscriptions and exaggerations
- ◆ Historicity of inscriptions and Puranas

On scientific grounds, epigraphy, numismatics and archaeology are more important than literature. Panini's and Patanjali's grammatical works have mostly fixed dates. Since they are almost free from myths and legends, they are as reliable as coins and inscriptions. Inscriptions also have exaggerations, especially royal ones. With regard to Mauryan inscriptions, a lot of them are dismissed on the grounds of little historical value. The number of people said to be killed in the Kalinga war, and those transported to Pataliputra has to be re-examined. There are also exaggerations in the inscriptions of the Guptas. However, inscriptions are more reliable when compared to Puranas and other literary texts. The period of Satavahanas of Deccan is placed in the first century BCE on the basis of inscriptions, though the *Puranas* push it backwards. The dynastic history of the king, his conquests etc., may be indicated in the inscriptions. Still, more than that, they also show the changes in political, economic and social growth. In the post-Gupta period, the epigraphical land grants are not mere land transfer records, but more than that, they show the changes in agrarian and social systems. The coins of Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Satavahanas, and Kushanas are mainly used for reconstructing their history. The trade aspects and urban life can also be gleaned from them.

For the reconstruction of past life, the bunch of information received from the coins, inscriptions and texts are needed.

- ◆ *Comparative study with ancient societies*
- ◆ *Human genetic research*

Here lies the question of the pertinence of sources. The mythologies in the Puranas and epics are scarcely more valuable than inscriptions, numismatics and archaeology. The myths and legends may uphold the values cherished through several generations and support the privileges and discomforts of the different castes and classes. The information provided by them cannot be fully trusted. The past survivals of modern times can be used to explain the ancient practices. Familiarities with village people and the insights derived from the study of primitive people are valuable assets in the construction of ancient history. The developments and changes in other ancient societies always need to be considered while reconstructing ancient times. A comparative study always helps to get rid of obsessions concerning our past and also provides fresh insight into those ideas our country shares with others. Human genetic research offers a plethora of knowledge about the cultural exchanges and movement of the population.

Summarised Overview

While ancient Indians may not have compiled history in the same way as ancient Greeks, there is evidence of a historical sense in ancient Indian literature, particularly in the Puranas and biographical writings. The biographical writings such as *Harshacharita*, *Ramacharita*, *Vikramankadevacharita*, *Mushikavamsakavya*, and *Rajatarangini* provide valuable insights into the court life, social and religious situations, and political achievements of various rulers and important figures of different periods.

The study of archaeological sites can provide further insights into social, economic, and cultural trends in ancient India. Around 200 sites related to the ancient historical period have been excavated. Still, their contributions to the study of social, economic, and cultural trends in ancient India have not been adequately analysed.

To construct ancient Indian history, both indigenous and foreign literary sources have been used, along with coins and inscriptions. However, it is important to examine the date and time of these sources critically and to correlate them with archaeological evidence. Archaeological excavations have mainly focused on the Brahmanical and Buddhist sites mentioned in literary sources, but the evidence from other cultures and regions is yet to be analysed.



Self Assessment

1. Which era commenced in 78 CE?
2. Which work describes the achievements of Chalukyan king Vikramaditya?
3. Who wrote *Harshacharita*?
4. Which work depicts the victory of Pala Prince Ramapala in his conflict with the Kaivarta peasants?
5. When did the Vikrama era begin?
6. Who composed the Sanskrit chronicle *Mushikavamsa*?
7. What is the theme of *Mushikavamsa*?
8. What are the four ages of mankind depicted in Puranas?
9. Who wrote *Rajatarangini*?
10. When was the Gupta era started?
11. What is the theme of *Rajatarangini*?
12. Who wrote the Sanskrit epic poem *Ramacharita*?

Assignments

1. Briefly discuss the historical sense of ancient Indians.
2. Examine how the biographies help in the reconstruction of Indian history.
3. Assess the pertinence of archaeological sources in redrawing the past.
4. Historical value of the epigraphs needs to be extracted in its true sense. Discuss.
5. Analyse how history can be reconstructed from the myths and legends of Puranas.

Suggested Readings

1. Kosambi, D.D., *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Book Depot Bombay, 1956.
2. Sharma, R.S, *Aspect of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass Publication, New Delhi, 1991.
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Geographical Setting

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ◆ get an insight into the physical features of the country
- ◆ understand how geographical factors have acted as natural boundaries
- ◆ examine how India in the past has utilized natural resources to shape its societal and cultural development

Background

The study of history involves an understanding of the various factors that have contributed to the development of different societies over time. One important factor is the geographical setting, which has played a crucial role in shaping the history of various regions. The Indian subcontinent is a prime example of this, as its distinct geographical features have had a profound impact on its history.

The Indian subcontinent was formed from the ancient landmass of Pangaea, which broke into two parts known as Gondwanaland and Eurasia around 300 million years ago. Over time, Gondwanaland began to break into different parts due to tectonic upheavals around 225 million years ago. The subcontinent, which was formed from Gondwanaland about 40 million years ago, later drifted towards the Eurasian continent. It is characterised by a diverse range of geographical features, including the Himalayas, Indo-Gangetic plains, Ganga-Yamuna doab, Aravalli ranges, Vindhya mountains, Kathiawar peninsula, rivers of northern and peninsular India, monsoons, and mineral resources. These distinct features have helped shape the history and cultural identity of the Indian subcontinent and are explored in detail in this unit.

Keywords

North East Monsoon, Southwest Monsoon, Indo-Gangetic plains, Pamir plateau, Vindhyan ranges, Malwa plateau, Western ghats, Eastern ghats, Coromandel coast



Discussion

1.3.1 Geographical Factors

◆ *Himalayas and the climate of north India*

India is bounded on the North by the Himalayas and sea on the other three sides. The cold arctic winds blowing from Siberia to central Asia are prevented from entering the country by the Himalayas. The climate of north India remains fairly warm throughout the year because of this. As the cold is not very severe in the Gangetic plain, people are free to live in the open for longer periods. The invasions from the north were averted by the Himalayas. At the same time, the Khyber, Bolan and Gomal pass in the Sulaiman mountain ranges situated in the northwestern part of India, and the Bolan pass in the Kirthar ranges served as the channels of communication and invasion in the ancient period between India and central Asia. Various traders and invaders from Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan came to India and vice versa through them. The passes in the Hindu Kush mountain ranges also facilitated trade and cultural relations between India on the one hand and Central Asia and West Asia on the other. The Himalayas are also the abode of the beautiful valleys of Kashmir and Nepal. The Kashmir valley is surrounded on all sides by high mountains and can be reached through several passes. During winter, the inhabitants moved to the plains, and its summer attracted people from the plains.

◆ *Mountains, passes and the socio-cultural and economic relations of India*

There was always trade and cultural contact between the valley and the plains. The Pamir plateau became the centre of Buddhism and its transmission to the adjacent areas of Central Asia. The valley of Nepal is small when compared to the Kashmir valley, and a number of passes make it easily accessible to the northern plains. A large number of Sanskrit manuscripts are deposited in the Kashmir and Nepal valleys. It was easier to clear the jungles on the foothills of the Himalayas than on the plains. The rivers in these areas are also narrower, which makes it easy to cross them. Hence the earliest trade routes developed along the foothills of the Himalayas from the west to the east and vice versa. The earliest agricultural settlements also sprang up in the foothills and uplands.

The Indo-Gangetic plains became the core of several cultures. This region produced rich crops after it was brought under cultivation. Wheat and barley were the principal crops

- ◆ *The significance of Ganga-Yamuna Doab*

of the Indus and western Gangetic plains, while the middle and lower Gangetic plains produced rice. The Indus Valley was the abode of Harappan culture, and the Vedic culture originated in the North Western frontier province and Punjab and flourished in the western Gangetic plain. The mid-Gangetic basin became the centre of post-Vedic culture, mainly based on the development of iron. It was during the time of the Guptas that the lower Gangetic Valley and Bengal region came into the limelight. The Brahmaputra valley got prominence in the early medieval period. These regions, especially Ganga-Yamuna *doab*, were often coveted by powerful rulers who fought for supremacy.

1.3.1.1 Rivers and Mountains

- ◆ *Role of rivers in ancient India*
- ◆ *Ancient towns and capitals on the banks of rivers*

In ancient times, the main channels of transport and communication were the rivers. The river routes were the main channels for commercial and military purposes in the past. From the ancient past till the time of the British, they served as the main means of communication. The inundation of the rivers often made the neighbouring areas fertile and also vulnerable to floods. These floods destroyed the towns and villages in the northern plains, and many ancient buildings were also wiped out in their course. The ancient towns and capitals, including Hastinapura, Prayag, Varanasi and Pataliputra, were situated on the banks of the rivers. In the modern scenario, the picture changed with railway and road junctions or industrial and mining zones attracting townships close to them.

- ◆ *Location of Aravalli ranges, Thar desert and Ganga-Yamuna Doab*
- ◆ *Significance of fertile plains*

In between the Indus and the Gangetic systems to the north and the Vindhya ranges to the south lies a vast stretch of land. It is divided into two units by the Aravalli ranges. The Thar desert occupies the western area of the Aravallis. A part of Rajasthan also lies in this region. A few fertile oases found in the desert were settled in ancient times, and it became possible to cross the desert on camels. The southeastern portion of Rajasthan was settled from the Chalcolithic period onwards. It is a fertile region, and the Khetri mines exist there. Gujarat is situated at the end of the northwestern portion of the Deccan plateau. The Kathiawar peninsula is situated here. Several harbours were established in the coastal zone of Gujarat, which favoured coastal and foreign trade since ancient times. The fertile plains of Gujarat are watered by the Narmada, Tapti, Mahi and Sabarmati rivers. The state of Madhya Pradesh is bound



◆ *Role of rivers and mountains in demarcating boundaries*

by Ganga- Yamuna Doab to the north, the Chambal and Son Rivers to the west and east, respectively, and the Vindhya ranges and Narmada River to the south. The plains in the northern part of the state are very fertile. The eastern part, which is mostly covered by the Vindhya ranges, became important during the Gupta period. But the Malwa plateau on the western side was historically important from the sixth century BCE onwards. Malwa served as a hinterland for the ports of Gujarat. It can be seen that several wars were fought for the possession of Malwa and Gujarat by the northern and Deccan powers. The Sakas and Satavahanas fought for their possession in the first and second centuries, and the Rajputs and Marathas in the eighteenth century.

It was the rivers along with the mountains that demarcated political and cultural boundaries in the past. In the eastern part of the Indian peninsula, the Kalinga region, i.e., the coastal belt of Odisha, is situated between the rivers Mahanadi and Godavari to the north and south, respectively. The Andhra region lies between Godavari to the north and Krishna to the south. The deltaic plain formed by them was very fertile. During the period of the Satavahanas, a number of towns and ports rose to prominence in the first century of the Common Era. Between river Krishna to the north and Kaveri to the south lies the major area of the Tamil region. The fertile Kaveri valley, which extends up to the Vaigai river in the south, was the seat of Chola power before the Common Era and it formed a separate geographical zone then. The northern part of Tamil Nadu consists of uplands and became the territory of Pallavas, who ruled from the fourth to the sixth centuries. To the eastern part of the peninsula lies the Coromandel coast, which is flanked by the Eastern Ghats. They are not very high and has several gaps caused by the eastward flow of the rivers into the Bay of Bengal. This helped in the intercourse between the eastern coast and other parts of the Andhra and Tamil regions. The port cities of Arikamedu, Mahabalipuram and Kaveripattanam were flourishing centres of trade on the Coromandel coast.

The western part of the peninsula does not encompass such distinct divisions as in the east. Tapi to the North and Bhima to the south is situated in the state of Maharashtra. Karnataka region lies between Bhima and the upper regions of the Krishna to the north and the Tungabhadra to the south. Tungabhadra served as a natural boundary between the powers to its north and south. When the Chalukyas of

- ◆ Territory between rivers and different political powers
- ◆ Malabar coast and trade contact with the west

Badami and the Rashtakutas found it difficult to extend their sway to the south of Tungabhadra, the Pallavas and Cholas also experienced the same to its north. The extreme southwest coastal area is covered by Kerala state. The sea coast along the western part of the peninsula is called the Malabar Coast. Several ports and small kingdoms along the coast had extensive trade contacts with foreign powers, but intercourse with the adjoining areas of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu was made difficult by the western ghats with the dangerous passes to cross.

1.3.1.2 Monsoons

- ◆ Rivers and rainfall

Rivers are the arteries of India and the tropical monsoon rains feed the important rivers which formed the heartland of the Indian subcontinent, which include the Indus Plains, the Indo-Gangetic divide, the Gangetic Basin and the Brahmaputra Basin. The rainfall pattern shows that the annual rainfall increases from the west to the east. The Indus and the west Gangetic vegetation was easy to clear when compared to the mid-Gangetic, lower- Gangetic and Brahmaputra regions which were too thickly forested. These regions also had hard soil, which could be cleared more efficiently with the iron implements, which were made only much later. So the natural resources of the western regions, which receive low rainfall when compared to other regions, were exploited first.

- ◆ Role of monsoons in moulding history
- ◆ Types of monsoons - South West and North East monsoons

The Indian subcontinent is situated in the tropical zone. The monsoons had always played an important role in the shaping of Indian history. The subcontinent experiences both the northeast and southwest monsoons. The southwest monsoon falls between June and October, and the northeast monsoon occurs from mid-October to mid-December. Heavy rains occur in different parts of the country in varying degrees during the monsoon period. Indian agriculture in ancient times always depended on the monsoons. The *kharif* crops of north India depended on the southwest monsoon. After the discovery of the monsoon winds by Hippalus in the first century CE, the traders sailed with the South West monsoon winds to India and South East Asia from Western Asia and the Mediterranean region. With the arrival of the north east monsoon, they returned westward. The discovery of monsoon winds was a crucial factor in the development of trade and cultural relations between India, the Western world and South East Asia.



1.3.2 Cultural Contacts

- ◆ *Role of natural frontiers and the resources in shaping regional identities*
- ◆ *Indo-Aryan and Dravidian Languages*

Each region bounded by rivers, mountains, deltas or plateaus constituted a unit of political and administrative power in which several ruling dynasties rose and fell. It was not easy for the ruling class of one region to bring other areas under their sway due to the presence of natural frontiers and the absence of a smooth communication system. In the course of time, each region developed its own distinct cultural traits, style of life and language. Since most languages in northern and western India were derived from the Indo-Aryan stock, they had many features in common. Sanskrit came to be used and understood all over India very soon. The Vindhya mountains formed a boundary between North India and South India. The inhabitants south of Vindhyas spoke the Dravidian language, and to its north spoke Indo-Aryan languages. The tribal people lived in the Vindhya regions, where they were still found. The southern region of peninsular India and the coastal areas along the Eastern and Western ghats attracted flourishing foreign trade. Though there was difficulty in communication, there was no barrier to the movement of the people to the north and south of the Vindhyas. This favoured cultural, religious and commercial contacts. Though many regions had natural frontiers, they did not possess all the needed natural resources for their livelihood and development. It was this need for metals and other resources that prompted the people to produce a network of interconnection between the various regions.

1.3.2.1 Role of Minerals and Other Resources

- ◆ *Use of burnt bricks in buildings*

The exploitation of the natural resources had greatly influenced Indian history. In early times, the Indian plains were thickly forested areas which provided fuel, forage and timber until human settlements developed on a large scale. In the ancient period, timber houses and palatial buildings were mainly constructed with the use of burnt bricks on a large scale. Their remains have been found in Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital and the first great capital city of India. All kinds of stones needed for construction and tool making were available in India. The early human settlements were mostly found in hilly areas and in those river valleys that are situated between the hills. Many temples and works of sculpture made of stone are found in South India and Deccan than in the plains of North India.

Copper is widely found in various regions of India. The

♦ *India's mineral wealth: Copper, Tin, Iron, and Silver*

Singhbhum district in Chota Nagpur Plateau is one of the richest copper mines. The copper mines of Singhbhum and Hazaribagh were utilised by the ancient people, and many copper tools have been discovered in South Bihar and parts of Madhya Pradesh. Copper deposits are also found in the Khetri mines of Rajasthan. People who lived in the present areas of Pakistan, Rajasthan, Gujarat and the Ganga-Yamuna doab during the pre-Vedic and Vedic periods had tapped these resources. A number of copper belts have been found in the Khetri zone, which might have belonged to a period earlier than c. 1000 BCE. Tin was found in Rajasthan, southern Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. The Harappans procured tin from Rajasthan, but their main supply was from Afghanistan. Although the Harappan people produced bronze tools by mixing copper with tin, they were limited when compared to those found in Western Asia, Egypt and Crete. The Harappan tools also contain only a small percentage of tin. From the early centuries of the Common era onwards, India developed contacts with Myanmar and the Malay peninsula which was rich in tin deposits. This led to the use of tin on a large scale and was widely used for making statues of gods on a large scale in south India. During the Pala period, tin was extracted from the Chota Nagpur plateau for making bronze figures.

♦ *Availability of iron and the rise of political powers*

Iron ores are found in abundance in South Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Karnataka. Once the smelting of iron was learnt, iron implements were used for war and for clearing jungles. The availability of iron had been a crucial factor in the rise of Magadha as the first empire in the sixth to fourth centuries BCE. Avanti also rose to prominence due to the availability of iron in the same period. The Satavahanas and other powers in Deccan might have also used the iron ores of the Andhra region and Karnataka. Lead is found abundantly in the Andhra region. This was utilised by the Satavahanas, whose realm included these areas in the first two centuries of the Common era. It is also found in Rajasthan. Silver is rarely found in India, though the earliest punch-marked coins were largely made of silver. Silver mines existed in the Kharagpur hills in the early times.

Placer deposits are found in the Gangetic plains, which were brought down by the rivers from the Himalayas. Placers are large quantities of gold dust brought down by the rivers. Kolar gold fields of Karnataka are the main source of gold in



◆ *Roman Trade
and the
procurement of
precious metals*



India. Till the beginning of the second century CE, there is no indication of its exploitation from India. It was from Central Asia and the Roman Empire, gold was procured in ancient India. It was during the first five centuries of the Common Era that gold came into regular use. Once it became difficult to provide an uninterrupted supply of gold from outside, gold coins became rare. Local resources were insufficient to ensure its supply. India also produced a large variety of precious stones in several regions of central India, Orissa, and South India. The Romans sought these eagerly in their trade relations with South India in the early centuries of the Common Era.

Summarised Overview

India's geography has played a significant role in shaping its history. The geographical features of India include the Himalayas, Sulaiman and Hindukush mountain ranges, valleys of Kashmir and Nepal, rivers and the Indo-Gangetic plains. The Himalayas have protected India from invasions from the north, while the passes in the mountain ranges served as channels of communication and invasion in the ancient period between India and Central Asia.

India's landscape is also characterised by the Thar desert in the northwestern region, which has fertile oases and has been crossed on camels since ancient times. The southeastern portion of Rajasthan was settled from the Chalcolithic period onwards and had the Khetri mines. At the same time, Gujarat's fertile plains are watered by the Narmada, Tapti, Mahi, and Sabarmati rivers. Madhya Pradesh is bounded by the Ganga-Yamuna Doab, the Chambal and Son Rivers, the Vindhya Ranges and the Narmada River, with its fertile plains in the northern part of the state and the historically important Malwa plateau on the western side.

The Indo-Gangetic plains have been the core of several cultures, producing rich crops such as wheat, barley, and rice after it was brought under cultivation. The river routes were the main channels for commercial and military purposes in the past and have been the main means of communication from the ancient past till the time of the British. In ancient times, the towns and capitals, including Hastinapura, Prayag, Varanasi, and Pataliputra, were situated on the banks of the rivers.

The rivers have been the lifeline of its people for thousands of years. The annual monsoon rains that feed these rivers have played a significant role in Indian agriculture, particularly in the cultivation of *kharif* crops in north India. The discovery of the monsoon winds in the first century CE led to the development of

trade and cultural relations between India and the Western world and Southeast Asia.

The abundance of natural resources found in India, such as copper and tin, which have greatly influenced Indian history. The need for metals and other resources led to the creation of a network of interconnection between the various regions of the subcontinent, despite the natural barriers that existed between them. Copper mines in Singhbhum and Hazaribagh and tin deposits in Rajasthan, southern Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar were tapped by the ancient people. The Harappans, for example, produced bronze tools by mixing copper with tin, but their tools were limited compared to those found in Western Asia, Egypt, and Crete. However, from the early centuries of the Common era, India developed contacts with Myanmar and the Malay peninsula, which were rich in tin deposits. This led to the use of high-quality bronze tools in India.

Self Assessment

1. What was the main agricultural crop produced in the Indus and western Gangetic plains?
2. Which desert occupies the western area of the Aravallis in India?
3. Which rivers water the fertile plains of Gujarat in India?
4. Which mountain passes served as the channels of communication and invasion between India and Central Asia in the ancient period?
5. Who discovered the monsoon winds in the first century CE?
6. Which mountain region formed a boundary between North India and South India?
7. What are the major copper mines in India?
8. From where did Harappans procure tin?
9. Which was the main source of gold in India?
10. What role do the monsoons play in the shaping of Indian history?

Assignments

1. Explain in detail how the geographical features of India moulded its history.
2. It is the geographical features of India that enabled her to develop as a distinct political and cultural entity. Discuss.



3. The heart of historical India is formed by its rivers. Discuss.
4. Discuss how the natural frontiers of peninsular India enable her to develop trade relations with the West.
5. Provide a comprehensive explanation of the primary mineral resources found in India. How it influenced the trade relations of India?

Suggested Readings

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6. Raghubir Dayal, *An Outline of Indian History and Culture*, vol.1, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1984.



Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



Pre-History and Proto-History: An Archaeological Perspective

BLOCK-02



Paleolithic Context in India

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ♦ describe the evolution of early humans and the characteristics of the Paleolithic period in India
- ♦ identify various Paleolithic sites in India, and explain their significance in the study of human evolution.
- ♦ analyse Paleolithic tool technology, art, and culture and explain how they reflect the evolution of early humans.

Background

The Paleolithic period, also known as the Old Stone Age, is a crucial era in human history that spanned from around 2.6 million years ago until the emergence of the Neolithic period around 10,000 BCE. This period was characterized by the development of stone tools, the emergence of hunting and gathering societies, and the evolution of early hominids such as *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*. The study of Paleolithic context in India provides significant insights into the early cultural evolution of humans in South Asia.

As the subcontinent lies at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe, it played a vital role in the migration patterns of early humans. As we study Paleolithic artefacts and fossils discovered in India, we can trace the history of human evolution and migration patterns. It reveals that hominids were present in the region as early as 2 million years ago. The study of the Paleolithic period in India provides a unique perspective on the global history of human evolution. This unit will discuss the evolution of early humans, features of the Paleolithic age in India, various Paleolithic sites, Paleolithic tool technology and their art and culture.

Keywords

Paleolithic, Human evolution, Geological ages, Hominids, Subsistence, Archaeology, Levallois technique, Acheulian tools



Discussion

2.1.1 Geological Ages and Hominid Evolution

- ◆ *Geological Ages of the Earth*

Geologists have categorized the Earth's history into four distinct eras or ages that correspond to the development of life forms: Primary (Palaeozoic), Secondary (Mesozoic), Tertiary, and Quaternary. The Tertiary and Quaternary together constitute the Cenozoic era, also known as the age of mammals, which commenced approximately 100 million years ago (mya). The Cenozoic era is further subdivided into seven epochs, with significant importance placed on the last two—the Pleistocene and Holocene—in relation to the evolution of hominids. The Pleistocene epoch began around 1.6 mya, while the Holocene (our current epoch) commenced approximately 10,000 years ago.

- ◆ *Using fossils to understand human evolution*

Paleoanthropologists have utilized fossil evidence to construct the captivating narratives surrounding the biological and cultural progression of early humans. It often poses challenges to identify a species solely based on incomplete skeletal remains, and determining whether these remnants accurately represent the entire population of a given region is not always evident. Nonetheless, distinct stages in the journey of human evolution can be discerned, along with the implications of significant biological markers such as the expansion of cranial capacity (brain size), alterations in pelvic structure, the advent of bipedalism (walking upright on two legs), and changes in dental structure due to shifting dietary patterns. Several noteworthy facets of the cultural advancement of early humans encompass the development of stone tools, the emergence of rudimentary social structures, the origins of language, and the capacity for symbolic thinking.

- ◆ *Australopithecus genus and early hominids*

- ◆ *The emergence of Homo Habilis and stone tools*

The earliest hominids, resembling human-like species, belonged to the *Australopithecus* genus and existed approximately between 4.4 and 1.8 mya. These remains have solely been discovered in Africa. Among them, *Ardipithecus* (*Australopithecus ramidus*) appears to have evolved from a common ancestor of the hominid and pongid ape lineages in sub-Saharan Africa around 4.4 mya. While the *Australopithecines* may have utilized naturally available materials as tools, there is no definitive evidence supporting them as toolmakers. Fossil evidence of the

earliest representatives of the *Homo* genus, *Homo habilis*, has been unearthed at various locations such as Koobi Fora in Kenya and the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, and is estimated to be around 2 mya. The earliest stone tools were discovered in Hadar, Ethiopia, and have been dated to approximately 2.5 mya.

◆ *Homo erectus and Neanderthals*

Homo erectus, named for their upright stance, emerged in East Africa approximately 1.7 million years ago. This species then migrated and inhabited diverse regions across Africa, Asia, and Europe. The first appearance of *Homo sapiens*, our modern human species, occurred roughly 500,000 years ago. Around 130,000 years ago, evidence of *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals) emerged in various locations throughout western and central Asia, as well as Europe.

◆ *The Appearance of Homo Sapiens*

Anatomically modern humans, known as *Homo sapiens*, seem to have appeared in Africa between 195,000 and 150,000 years ago and eventually replaced all other *Homo* species. Important fossil remains have come from the site of Herto in Ethiopia, where hominid remains were found along with stone tools and animal bones in levels dated between 160,000 to 154,000 years ago. There are many questions to which there are yet no definite answers and which remain matters of debate. It is possible that *Homo sapiens* evolved in Africa and then migrated to various parts of Asia and Europe. Or, the migration out of Africa could have happened at an earlier stage, and modern *Homo sapiens* may have evolved from *Homo erectus* and archaic *Homo sapiens* more or less simultaneously on different continents.

◆ *The migration of Homo sapiens*

Between 195,000 and 150,000 years ago, anatomically modern humans, referred to as *Homo sapiens*, emerged in Africa, gradually replacing other *Homo* species. Noteworthy fossil discoveries have been made at the Herto site in Ethiopia, where hominid remains, stone tools, and animal bones were unearthed in layers dated from approximately 160,000 to 154,000 years ago. It is plausible that *Homo sapiens* originated in Africa and subsequently migrated to different regions in Asia and Europe. Alternatively, the migration from Africa may have occurred earlier, with modern *Homo sapiens* evolving simultaneously from *Homo erectus* and archaic *Homo sapiens* on distinct continents.

From the 19th century onwards, numerous fossil ape remains were unearthed in the Siwalik Hills, the outermost



◆ The 'God-Apes of the Siwaliks' and *Ramapithecus*

range of the Himalayas. These fascinating discoveries received grandiose names such as *Ramapithecus*, *Sivapithecus*, and *Brahmapithecus*, collectively known as the 'God-Apes of the Siwaliks'. *Ramapithecus* remains were subsequently found in other regions across Asia, Africa, and Europe, with estimated dates ranging from 10 to 14 million years ago (mya). Initially, *Ramapithecus*, who lived during the transition from the Miocene to the Pliocene epoch, was considered the earliest direct ancestor of modern humans. However, this viewpoint has been subject to scrutiny due to the introduction of new dating methods and a reevaluation of fossil evidence.

◆ Discovery of *Homo erectus narmadensis*

In 1982, Arun Sonakia from the Geological Survey of India made a significant discovery near Hathnora village, situated on the northern bank of the Narmada River, approximately 40 km northeast of Hoshangabad. Within a thick, densely packed sandy and pebbly gravel layer, Sonakia uncovered a fossilized fragment of a cranium (skull cap), alongside some vertebrate fossils and a few late Acheulian tools. Analysis suggests that the skull fragment likely belonged to a 30-year-old woman. Sonakia proposed that she represented an advanced variant of *Homo erectus*, characterized by a larger cranial capacity ranging from 1155 to 1421 cc. Consequently, he named her *Homo erectus narmadensis*. However, other scholars argue that the cranium belongs to an early (archaic) form of *Homo sapiens*. The cranium has been dated to the early part of the middle Pleistocene, approximately 500,000 years BP (Before the Present)

◆ Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age

2.1.2 The Three-Age System

The concept of linking human history to the materials used for crafting tools originated in 1836, when Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, a Danish archaeologist, confronted the challenge of displaying an undocumented assortment of ancient tools and implements. Thomsen devised a system that classified these artifacts into three categories based on their material composition: stone, bronze, and iron. He believed that these materials represented a progressive sequence of technological advancement. This notion has subsequently been formalized through the identification of distinct periods known as the Stone Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age.

2.1.2.1 The Lithic Age

The Stone Age, which occupied a significant portion of

◆ *Classification of Stone Age*

the Pleistocene Epoch, persisted for a considerable duration. It is noteworthy that copper and bronze materials emerged over 5,000 years ago, while iron came into prominence in the subsequent millennium. Importantly, the Stone Age extends up to the present era. A crucial development within the study of the Stone Age was the identification of distinct changes that occurred during this era. In 1863, John Lubbock classified the Stone Age into two distinct periods: the Paleolithic (Old Stone Age) and the Neolithic (New Stone Age). Subsequently, Edouard Lartet proposed a further division of the Paleolithic period into Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic. This classification was largely based on changes in fauna associated with different tool types. Over time, archaeologists gradually discerned distinctive tool-making traditions within the Paleolithic and acknowledged the significance of changes in subsistence patterns during the Stone Age. It is worth noting that the term Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) is a comparatively recent addition and represents the transitional phase from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic era.

◆ *Division of Paleolithic period*

In the study of Indian prehistory, the Stone Age is categorized into three distinct periods: the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. These divisions are based on geological age, the type and technological advancements of stone tools, as well as the subsistence practices employed. The Paleolithic period further divided into the Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic. The Lower Paleolithic, with a general timeframe ranging from approximately 2 million years ago to 100,000 years ago, represents an early phase. The Middle Paleolithic, spanning from about 100,000 to 40,000 years ago, reflects a subsequent stage. Lastly, the Upper Paleolithic, occurring from approximately 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, signifies a more recent period. It is important to note that specific dates can vary significantly across different archaeological sites. The Paleolithic cultures belong to the Pleistocene geological era, while the Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures belong to the subsequent Holocene Era, denoting a distinct transition in geological time.

Stone Age cultures in the Indian subcontinent did not follow a uniform and linear progression. Regional variations in cultural features were observed, and the dates associated with these cultures exhibited significant variation. It is important to note that tool assemblages found at different sites may not be completely uniform, and tools typically



◆ *Regional variations and the subsistence base*

attributed to one phase could also be present in other phases. For instance, while celts are generally associated with the Neolithic phase, they have been found in certain parts of eastern India even during the historical period. This indicates that the presence of certain tools does not strictly conform to a particular phase. Similarly, in terms of subsistence practices, it is noteworthy that the transition to animal and plant domestication did not mark the end of hunting and gathering. These activities continued alongside the emerging agricultural practices.

2.1.3 The Paleolithic Context in the Indian Subcontinent

2.1.3.1 Lower Paleolithic Sites

◆ *Distribution of Lower Paleolithic sites*

Paleolithic tools have been discovered throughout the subcontinent, with notable exceptions in the alluvial areas of the Indus and Ganga valleys (excluding Kalpi in U.P). Lower Paleolithic sites are predominantly found in rocky regions within or on the periphery of these valleys, such as the Rohri hills in Sindh and the northern fringes of the Vindhyas. In other parts of the subcontinent, particularly in peninsular India (excluding the coastal plains), a multitude of Paleolithic sites has been extensively documented. Although the identification of Paleolithic habitation sites remains relatively scarce, it can be presumed that human settlements were situated in proximity to essential resources like food, water, and stone. These habitats included riverbanks, streams, caves, and rock shelters.

Significant evidence regarding the dating of Lower Paleolithic contexts has been obtained from the Potwar plateau and the Siwalik Hills. Notably, in the Jhelum basin at Dina and Jalalpur, a British archaeological team discovered 15 artifacts, including three handaxes, within a boulder conglomerate deposit. These findings were dated to approximately 700,000-500,000 years ago using the paleomagnetic method. Additionally, earlier dates have been recorded at Riwat near Rawalpindi in the Punjab province of Pakistan. In 1983, the British Archaeological Mission to Pakistan's Potwar Project, in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology and the Geological Survey of Pakistan, unearthed stone artifacts embedded in a stone conglomerate deposit, which were dated to 2.01 million years

◆ *Dating of Lower Paleolithic contexts*

ago using the paleomagnetic method. Furthermore, at the Gurha Sahan and PS-57 sites in the Pinjor bed of the Siwalik Hills, stone tools were discovered and dated between 2.4 and 2 million years ago. Similar stone tools from the Jammu and Himachal sections of the Siwalik Hills also belong to this age. For instance, at Uttarbaini in the Jammu area, early Paleolithic tools were found in a deposit dated to approximately 2.8 ± 0.5 million years ago. Didwana in Rajasthan has been dated to 390,000 years before present (BP). In the Hiran Valley in Gujarat, the lower Paleolithic context is dated to a range of 190,000-69,000 BP. The Son Valley in Madhya Pradesh has been assigned a thermoluminescence date of $103,800 \pm 19,800$ BP. Nevasa in Maharashtra has provided a date of 350,000 BP. In Karnataka, the site of Yedurwadi has been dated to 350,000 BP.

◆ *Paleolithic tools in Rajasthan*

In Rajasthan, the Ajmer region has yielded Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic tools, while stray discoveries of Lower Paleolithic tools have been reported in the Luni valley. The Nagaur district in western Rajasthan provides a comprehensive overview of the Didwana area, with a stratigraphic sequence spanning from the Lower to Middle Paleolithic. Additionally, Mogara Hill near Jodhpur appears to have served as a manufacturing site for Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic tools, as well as Mesolithic tools.

◆ *Gujarat, the Konkan coast and Maharashtra*

Moving to Gujarat, Lower Paleolithic tools have been unearthed in the valleys of the Sabarmati River, its Orsang and Karjan tributaries, and the Bhadar valley in Saurashtra. Along the Konkan coast, Lower Paleolithic tools, along with later artefacts, have been discovered up to Goa. In Maharashtra, prehistoric tools have been found along the coastline and in the Wardha-Wainganga valleys. The Dattawadi area of the Mutha River in Pune has yielded Lower and Middle Paleolithic tools, while the Gangawadi area on the Godavari at Nasik has yielded Lower Paleolithic tools.

◆ *Narmada Valley and Bhimbetka*

In Central India, prehistoric remains are found in areas such as Damoh, Raisen, and the valleys of the Narmada, upper Son, and Mahanadi rivers. The Narmada Valley, in particular, stands out as a rich and extensively researched region. Excavations at Adamgarh Hill near Hoshangabad have revealed a sequence of Lower and Middle Paleolithic tools. However, the most remarkable findings come from the numerous rock shelters at Bhimbetka in the Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh, located 30 km north of Hoshangabad.



This site has provided evidence of an exceptionally long occupation sequence spanning from the Lower Paleolithic to the historic period. Bhimbetka, with sandstone and quartzite formations, attracted Stone Age communities due to shelter, food, and ample raw materials. Stone tools, mostly made from yellowish quartzite found nearby, were discovered. No human remains were found on this site.

- ◆ *Belan valley, Paisra, Chhotanagpur plateau and Sambalpur*

In the Belan Valley of Uttar Pradesh, a comprehensive study uncovered a sequence of Stone Age industries ranging from Lower Paleolithic to Neolithic to Protohistoric periods. In Bihar, a Lower Paleolithic site at Paisra revealed living and working floors with abundant stone artifacts and evidence of thatched huts. Lower Paleolithic tools were also discovered in the river valleys and foothills of the Chhotanagpur plateau in Jharkhand and adjacent areas of West Bengal. Orissa yielded Paleolithic tools from all three phases, including Lower and Middle Paleolithic tools found in the Sambalpur district.

- ◆ *Paleolithic sites in South India*

Karnataka's Malaprabha-Ghataprabha valleys contained both Lower and Upper Paleolithic tools, while the Krishna and Hunsgi-Baichbal valleys exhibited Lower Paleolithic tools, suggesting specific activities and temporary campsites. Andhra Pradesh revealed Lower Paleolithic tools in inland and coastal areas, indicating sea level changes. Important sites in Andhra Pradesh include Nagarjunakonda, Isampur, and Kurnool caves. Kerala's Palakkad district contained choppers and scrapers made of quartz. In Tamil Nadu, Gudiyam cave near Chennai yielded a sequence of Paleolithic tools, while Attirampakkam exhibited a rich Paleolithic site with Acheulian tools, animal footprints, and fossil teeth, indicating an early Paleolithic landscape.

- ◆ *Shift in stone tool technology*

2.1.3.2 Middle Paleolithic Sites

During the Paleolithic era, stone tools underwent gradual changes, with a shift towards smaller flake tools, including those made using prepared core techniques like the Levallois technique. Middle Paleolithic tools have been discovered in various regions of the Indian subcontinent, often in river gravels and deposits that provide insights into the prevailing climatic conditions. Some Middle Paleolithic contexts have been dated, such as Didwana in Rajasthan with thermoluminescence dates of 150,000 BP and 144,000 BP, and the Hiran Valley in Gujarat with a uranium-thorium series date of 56,800 BP.

◆ *North-West India*

The Potwar plateau between the Indus and Jhelum rivers in the North-West region has yielded numerous stone tools, predominantly from the Middle Paleolithic period. The Sanghao cave in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan revealed a sequence of Middle and Paleolithic occupation, including thousands of stone tools, bones, and hearths. quartz was the predominant material used for these tools, easily accessible in the vicinity. Factory sites and campsites have been discovered in the Thar Desert, particularly near rivers and lakes, offering water and stone resources. Budha Pushkar Lake and Ajmer are notable areas with Middle and Upper Paleolithic tools.

◆ *Luni and Nevasan industry*

Middle Paleolithic sites have been discovered in proximity to the now virtually extinct Luni river system as well. The Luni industry, referring to Middle Paleolithic assemblages west of the Aravallis, displays greater variety in stone tool types and reworked flakes compared to regions east of the Aravallis. The Middle Paleolithic industry found in central and peninsular India is commonly known as the Nevasan industry, named after the Nevasa site. It was at Nevasa that the renowned archaeologist H. D. Sankalia made the pioneering discovery of Middle Paleolithic artefacts in a stratified context. This site features a wide range of scrapers made from smooth, fine-grained stones like agate, jasper, and chalcedony. Kalpi in the Ganga plain revealed early traces of human occupation, with Middle Paleolithic stone tools and bone tools dating back approximately 45,000 years ago.

◆ *Middle Paleolithic Culture in South India*

In South India, the Middle Paleolithic culture is characterized by a flake tool industry, with frequent use of quartzite, chert, and quartz for stone tool production. The Levallois technique is evident in many places, and new tool types, including scrapers of various shapes, were introduced. The coastal site of Nandipalli in the Cuddapah district has been dated older than 23,000 years BP based on Carbon-14 dating, providing insights into the antiquity of Middle Paleolithic culture in South India.

◆ *Technological advances of the Upper Paleolithic*

2.1.3.3 Upper Paleolithic Sites

During the Upper Paleolithic period, the important technical advance was the development of parallel-sided blades and an increase in the use of burins. These advancements were accompanied by a shift towards smaller tools, which can be attributed to adaptations made in response to changing environmental conditions. Also, the climate in northern and



western India experienced increased aridity during this period.

◆ *Sites in North ,
North West and
Central India*

In the North-West region, the Sanghao cave has provided valuable evidence of Middle and Upper Paleolithic tools, hearths, animal remains, and possible burial sites. Upper Paleolithic tools have also been discovered in the Rohri hills in upper Sindh and Milestone 101 in lower Sindh. Moving to North India, the Upper Paleolithic artefacts found in Kashmir have been dated to approximately 18,000 BP, coinciding with the onset of a milder climate. The Thar region has fewer Upper Paleolithic sites compared to the preceding phase, mainly due to increasing aridity. However, human occupation persisted around the Budha Pushkar Lake. In central India, Upper Paleolithic habitation sites have been found in caves and rock shelters of the Vindhya.

◆ *Upper Paleolithic
assemblage in
Belan Valley*

The Belan Valley reveals an Upper Paleolithic context dating back 25,000 to 19,000 years ago, while the Son Valley indicates a timeframe of about 10,000 years ago. Chopani Mando in the Belan Valley appears to be a habitation site with a cultural sequence spanning from the Upper Paleolithic to the Neolithic. The Upper Paleolithic tool assemblage primarily consists of tools made from chert, a stone readily available in the nearby Vindhya. Animal bones discovered in the Belan Valley include those of wild cattle, sheep, and goats. Interestingly, the presence of non-indigenous sheep and goats suggests that they may have been introduced from the northwest, representing an early stage of animal domestication.

◆ *Baghor I and
Baghor III sites*

In the Siddhi district of Madhya Pradesh, in the Son River valley, an archaeological team led by G. R. Sharma and J. D. Clark excavated the Upper Paleolithic site of Baghor I. A subsequent microwear analysis conducted on the nearby Baghor III shed light on the subsistence activities during this phase. The study identified different activities associated with the stone tools found at the site, including craft work such as boring, scraping, and whittling, as well as activities related to food processing, hunting, or craft work such as cutting, slicing, piercing, and chopping. Microwear analysis revealed the use of tools on vegetal and non-vegetal materials, as well as the production of wood or bamboo implements for hunting and gathering purposes. Some tools displayed wear and polish indicative of being hafted onto handles.

The Chhotanagpur region, West Bengal, Assam, and other

- ◆ *Chhotanagpur, Bangladesh, Tripura, and Myanmar*

parts of the northeast are home to numerous Upper Paleolithic sites. For example, Paisra in the Munger district showcases such evidence, and Upper Paleolithic tools have been found in various districts of West Bengal. The paleolithic phase, however, lacks sufficient evidence in Assam and other parts of the northeast. Nonetheless, the Lalmai hills in Bangladesh, as well as the Haora and Khowai river valleys in western Tripura, have yielded a significant number of tools, including typical Upper Paleolithic types such as blades, burins, and points made from fossil wood. Similar tools have also been discovered in the upper Irrawaddy Valley in Myanmar.

- ◆ *Faunal remains at the cave sites in Andhra Pradesh*

The Upper Paleolithic cave sites of Kurnool and Muchchatla Chintamanu Gavi in Andhra Pradesh are notable as the only locations in the subcontinent where tools made from animal bones have been found within an Upper Paleolithic context. The faunal remains at these sites include a wide range of animals, indicating the diverse wildlife that coexisted with Upper Paleolithic communities. The list of animals found, such as bats, nilgai, antelopes, gazelles, deer species, wild boar, tigers, leopards, hyenas, and various rodents, suggests the presence of thick forests and more humid conditions in the area. Additionally, Upper Paleolithic artefacts have been uncovered in a cave at Renigunta in the Chittoor district of southern Andhra Pradesh. Stone tools from this phase can be found along the east coast of peninsular India, with their age ranging from 25,000 to 10,000 years ago.

- ◆ *Evolution and Classification*

2.1.4 Paleolithic Tools

The Paleolithic period is characterized as the longest phase of the Stone Age. Its classification into Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic is primarily based on the evolution of tools and techniques used in tool-making. The evolution of the tools can be observed from the crude hand axes and choppers of the Early Paleolithic to the advanced double-sided blades of the Upper Paleolithic. In terms of tool evolution and classification, a large stone broken into multiple pieces yields a core (the largest piece) and flakes (the smaller pieces). Tools made from the core are referred to as core tools, while those made from the flakes are called flake tools. The process of removing pieces from a rock is known as flaking, and the resulting surface depressions or marks are called flake scars.

Different types of Paleolithic tools include handaxes, which are generally biface core tools with a triangular shape and worked on both sides. Pebble tools are made on pebbles.



◆ *Types of Paleolithic tools*

◆ *Acheulian tools*

Chopping tools are flaked alternately on both sides, creating a wavy cutting edge. Choppers, on the other hand, are large tools worked on one side only, while cleavers have a broad rectangular or triangular flake with a straight cutting edge. The term Acheulian refers to a stone tool assemblage characterized by advanced and symmetrical handaxes and cleavers, often associated with the Lower Paleolithic but appearing in later periods as well.

◆ *Factory sites*

Factory sites located near raw material sources, played a significant role in tool production. These temporary sites offered easy access to raw materials and were marked by a profusion of stone tools at various stages of preparation. In Sindh, factory sites can be found in limestone hills capped by flint nodules, such as Jerruk and Milestone 101 in lower Sindh, as well as the Sukkur and Rohri hills in upper Sindh.

◆ *Levallois technique*

◆ *Discoid Core technique*

As mentioned above, the Middle Paleolithic witnessed a shift towards smaller tools and more advanced techniques. Although handaxes, chopping tools, and cleavers persisted, lighter flake tools became more prevalent. Some of them were made by prepared core techniques like the Levallois technique. The Levallois technique is an advanced way of making flake tools. It is named after a place called Levallois Perret near Paris, where this technique was first noticed on prehistoric stone tools. The Levallois technique involved careful preparation of the core, systematic removal of flakes, creation of a striking platform, and detachment of thin, clean flakes with sharp edges. Another technique, the discoid core technique, involved scalloping flakes from the circumference of a large core or flake to produce multiple flakes. The Levallois technique can be used to produce only one flake at a time, while the discoid core technique can produce several flakes.

◆ *Production of parallel- side blades and burins*

In the Upper Paleolithic, important technological advances included the production of parallel-sided blades and an increased use of burins. Tools became smaller in size. Blades, which are flake tools with a length more than twice their width, could be parallel-sided. Burins, small tools made on blades, possessed a sharp and thickset working border, resembling a modern screwdriver. Burins may have been utilized for engraving or creating grooves in wood or bone to attach stone tools.

2.1.5 Paleolithic Art, Life, and Culture

◆ *Significance of Paleolithic art*

Prehistoric art marks the beginning of the history of art and offers valuable insights into the world of ancient societies. Rock art, including paintings on rocks and petroglyphs, where portions of a rock surface are removed through various techniques like engraving or hammering, constitutes a significant aspect of prehistoric art. These artistic expressions were not confined to specific locations but could be found in permanent places like cave paintings or in portable forms like figurines. Evidently, these creations held an integral role within community life, often bearing religious or cultic significance.

◆ *Examples of prehistoric artefacts*

Examples of prehistoric artefacts further illustrate the significance of Paleolithic art. A damaged Upper Paleolithic carved bone object found at Lohanda Nala was interpreted as a mother goddess figurine or a harpoon. Grooved animal teeth found in a Kurnool cave hint at their potential use as ornaments. Additionally, engraved ostrich eggshells and chalcedony and sandstone discs found at various sites shed light on the artistic endeavours of the Upper Paleolithic period.

◆ *The Auditorium Cave*

◆ *Upper Paleolithic shrine*

Remarkable evidence of artistic and cultic activities can be observed in Cave III F-24 at Bhimbetka, known as the “auditorium cave.” This cave, situated at the boundary between the Lower and Middle Paleolithic, features cupules and carved marks, suggesting their involvement in community rituals. Similarly, the site of Baghor I in Madhya Pradesh unravels an Upper Paleolithic shrine, dated c.9000–8000 BCE, with a circular platform adorned with a striking triangular stone pattern.

◆ *Life-ways of Paleolithic people*

The lifestyle of Paleolithic communities varied across different regions as they adapted to their specific environments. Their dwellings ranged from temporary shelters made of natural materials to more permanent settlements. Sites like Bhimbetka and Hunsgi exhibit evidence of continuous occupation over long periods, while others signify temporary campsites or sites dedicated to specific activities such as hunting or tool production. Ethnographic evidence from modern hunter-gatherer communities suggests that leisure time was spent on socializing, games, and relaxation. While reevaluating the roles and activities of ancient hunter-gatherer communities, it becomes apparent that gathering played a vital role in acquiring sustenance alongside hunting.



This challenges the traditional emphasis on hunting and highlights the importance of gathering activities, which likely involved significant contributions from women. This understanding has implications for comprehending subsistence patterns and gender roles in Paleolithic societies.

Summarised Overview

Geologists divided the history of Earth into four eras. The Cenozoic era began around 100 million years ago. This era includes the Pleistocene and Holocene epochs, during which hominid evolution occurred. Fossil evidence traces the evolution of species like *Australopithecus*, *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus*, and *Homo sapiens* at different times. *Homo sapiens*, or anatomically modern humans, emerged in Africa 195,000 to 150,000 years ago and replaced other *Homo* species. Fossil discoveries in the Siwalik Hills and other parts of India have shed light on hominid evolution.

The Three Age System by Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1836) divides history into Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages based on technological development. John Lubbock (1863) further divided the Stone Age into Paleolithic and Neolithic. In India, the Stone Age has Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods, based on geological age, stone tool technology, and means of subsistence. Stone Age cultures varied regionally, and hunting and gathering persisted after domestication.

Paleolithic tools are found throughout India, especially in peninsular regions. Notable sites include Bhimbetka, with 700 rock shelters containing Lower Paleolithic rock paintings and stone tools. Attirampakkam (Tamil Nadu) yielded Acheulean tools and animal remains. Middle Paleolithic sites, such as the Potwar plateau, Sanghao cave, Thar Desert, and Budha Pushkar Lake, revealed changes in tool technology. The Middle Paleolithic period witnessed a shift towards smaller, lighter flake tools and the use of prepared core techniques such as the Levallois technique. The Nevasan industry in central and peninsular India uses smooth, fine-grained stone, while the Ganga plain has yielded Middle Paleolithic tools and vertebrate fossils. In South India, the Middle Paleolithic culture is marked by a flake tool industry and evidence of the Levallois technique.

The Upper Paleolithic period saw the development of parallel-sided blades and use of burins. Upper Paleolithic sites span India, including Sanghao cave, Rohri hills, Thar region, Vindhyas, Belan and Son valleys, and Chhotanagpur. Microwear analysis of Baghor I and III tools revealed craft and food activities. Hunsgi in Karnataka contains evidence of early human occupation, including stone tools and animal bones. It also served as a temporary campsite. Nagarjunakonda, Isampur and Kurnool caves are the important lower Palaeolithic sites in Andhra

Pradesh. Upper Paleolithic tools of bone were found in Kurnool and Muchchatla Chintamanu Gavi caves. Stone tools along the east coast also date back to the Upper Paleolithic.

The Paleolithic period, divided into Lower, Middle, and Upper, reflects tool evolution from hand axes to blades. Prehistoric art provides a glimpse into the lives of prehistoric people through paintings on rocks, petroglyphs, and figurines. The lifeways of Paleolithic people in different parts of the subcontinent were based on their adaptations to their environments, living in various shelters and engaging in social activities. Archaeological sites such as Bhimbetka and Hunsgi show continuous occupation over centuries, while others represent temporary or specific activities. Gender roles in Paleolithic societies were likely similar to modern hunter-gatherer communities where women played a significant role in gathering food.

Self Assessment

1. How did the Geologists divide the history of the earth according to the evolution of life forms?
2. Mention five Lower Paleolithic sites in India.
3. Who made the pathbreaking discovery of the fossilized cranium of an advanced variety of *Homo erectus* near Hathnora village in India?
4. What is the term used for the Middle Paleolithic assemblages west of the Aravallis in India?
5. What is the Middle Paleolithic industry of central and peninsular India referred to as?
6. Define the Levallois technique.
7. What is the discoid core technique?
8. What evidence suggests early stages of animal domestication during the Upper Paleolithic period?
9. Write a short note on Upper Paleolithic cave art.
10. What is a petroglyph in rock art?

Assignments

1. Discuss the geological ages and their significance in hominid evolution.
2. Explain how fossil evidence is used to identify different stages in the process of human evolution.



3. Explain the subsistence economy of the Paleolithic period.
4. Discuss the evolution of Paleolithic tools in India and their distribution across the subcontinent. What are the characteristics of Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic tools?
5. Explain the different forms of Paleolithic art found in India, and discuss their significance in shedding light on the beliefs and practices of prehistoric people in India.

Suggested Readings

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5. Sankalia, H. D, *The Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan*, Taraporevala Sons & Co, Bombay, 1974.



Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.





Mesolithic Context in India

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to :

- ◆ explain the characteristics of the Mesolithic period in India
- ◆ explore the ways in which early humans adapted to the environmental changes
- ◆ evaluate the significance of technological advancements during the Mesolithic period
- ◆ assess the features of the Mesolithic society, including their burial customs, art and culture

Background

We discussed the geological ages and human evolution in the previous unit. You have also read about the classification of stone age and particularly the classification, features such as subsistence base, tool-making techniques, art and sites of the first stone age, the Paleolithic period. The following stone age is the Mesolithic period, which dates back to around 10,000 BCE. It was a time of significant transition for early Indian societies as they moved from being nomadic hunter-gatherers to settled communities, engaged in agriculture and other activities. During this era, the subcontinent witnessed a remarkable transformation in terms of culture, technology, and economy, as well as significant changes in the environment, climate, and availability of resources.

During the Mesolithic period, people used tiny but expertly crafted stone tools called microliths for hunting, gathering, and processing food. They also fished, trapped, and weaved with these tools. These advances in technology allowed early Indians to survive and thrive in a changing world. It was also a time of cultural innovation, as evidenced by cave paintings, rock art, and burial customs. These cultural artefacts provide valuable insights into the beliefs, rituals, and social organization of early Indian societies. In this unit, we will delve deeper into the Mesolithic context in India, examining its various facets, such as technology, economy, society, and culture.



Keywords

Holocene, Epi-palaeolithic, Microliths, Settlements, Domestication, Rock Art, Burials, Grave Goods

Discussion

2.2.1 Mesolithic Age

◆ *Microliths*

Around 10,000 years ago, the transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene geological era resulted in significant environmental changes. Detailed records of climatic patterns in certain regions of the subcontinent provide insight into this transition. During the late Pleistocene or early Holocene, there witnessed changes in the stone toolkits of prehistoric communities. They began producing and using small tools known as microliths. At sites like Patne with a continuous stratigraphic sequence of prehistoric occupation, there is a clear observable trend of decreasing stone tool sizes over time. The transitional stage of tools smaller than those of the upper Paleolithic but larger than microliths is sometimes referred to as the Epi-Palaeolithic phase. This change in tool technology likely correlated with shifts in the environment.

◆ *Mesolithic settlements*

The term “Mesolithic” generally denotes the post-Pleistocene (Holocene) Stone Age cultures characterized by the use of microliths. However, precisely defining or identifying this phase can be challenging. Sites like Patne in Maharashtra and Fa Hien Lena, Batadomba Lena, and Beli Lena in Sri Lanka have revealed evidence of microliths in late Pleistocene contexts. The Mesolithic economy, like the Paleolithic, predominantly relied on hunting and gathering, although there are indications of animal domestication at some sites. Mesolithic settlements exhibited varying levels of sedentariness, with some being permanent or semi-permanent, serving as continuously inhabited locations over long periods. While pottery is mostly absent at Mesolithic sites, it has been found at Langhnaj in Gujarat and in the Kaimur region of Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh.

2.2.2 Mesolithic Sites

The transition from a hunting-gathering stage to settled agriculture can be observed at Chopani Mando in the Belan Valley. Excavations revealed three periods: an Epi-Paleolithic



- ◆ *Chopani Mando: Transition to settled agriculture*

phase followed by two clearly Mesolithic phases. The second period, divided into IIA and IIB phases, showed a shift from non-geometric to geometric microliths. Period III featured handmade pottery, bones of wild cattle and sheep or goats, and evidence of wattle-and-daub huts. The area outside the huts contained hearths and possible storage bins. Late Mesolithic levels at the site yielded traces of wild rice.

- ◆ *Burials and Grave goods at Sarai Nahar Rai*

- ◆ *Mahadaha - Elliptical burials*

The three excavated sites of Sarai Nahar Rai, Mahadaha, and Damdama lie very close to each other. Sarai Nahar Rai in UP, situated on an old course of the Ganga, displayed geometric microliths, shells, and animal bones. Eleven human burials (9 men, 4 women, and a child) were found and grave goods like microliths and shells. The Mesolithic level at Sarai Nahar Rai has been dated C. 8400 by the radio carbon method. Mahadaha, located near an oxbow lake, showcased a thick occupational deposit. Burials revealed elliptical pits and grave goods such as microliths, shells, and burnt animal bones. The butchering area contained bones of various animals.

- ◆ *Damdama: Microliths, human burials, and domesticated rice*

- ◆ *Fireplaces at Paisra*

- ◆ *Lekhakia and Baghai Khor Rock shelters*

Damdama, located at the confluence of a stream in the Sai river system, yielded microliths, bone objects, querns, millers, hearths, charred grain, and animal bones. Among 41 human burials, four were multiple burials, one of which contained an ivory pendant. Damdama dates back to the early 7th millennium BCE, with reports of domesticated rice in the Mesolithic levels. Another mesolithic site, Lekhakia rock shelters in Mirzapur unveiled blade tools and microliths, with smaller tools in upper layers. Burials and pottery were also discovered. Baghai Khor rock shelter exhibited a pre-ceramic and a ceramic microlithic phase, with two extended burials in each phase. Paisra's Mesolithic floor section revealed microliths and closely positioned fireplaces. The thin deposit suggests a brief Mesolithic occupation.

- ◆ *Birbhanpur: Habitation and factory site*

- ◆ *Bagor: Continuous Human Occupation*

Birbhanpur in West Bengal, near the Damodar River, served as a habitation and factory site, yielding Mesolithic stone tools made of quartz, chert, and chalcedony. Climate studies suggest drier conditions during the Mesolithic phase. Bagor in Rajasthan, situated on a sand dune near the Kothari River, documented continuous human occupation over 5,000 years. Microliths, including geometric shapes, were abundant throughout the periods, with stone arrangements, butchering areas, and various stone tools. Animal bones from both wild and domesticated species were found, and

traces of Mesolithic pottery were identified.

- ◆ *Langhnaj: Microliths, Burials, and Potsherds*

Microliths have been unearthed in the valleys of the Tapi, Narmada, Mahi, and Sabarmati rivers. Langhnaj is an important site where the occupational deposit has been categorized into three periods. The first period, belonging to the Mesolithic era, yielded microliths, human burials, wild animal bones, and pottery fragments.

- ◆ *Adamgarh Hills : Animal bones and Pottery*

Adamgarh hill near Hoshangabad represents a Mesolithic level, with shells dating back to around 5500 BCE, placing it in the 6th millennium BCE. Thousands of microliths made from chert, chalcedony, jasper, and agate were found, along with geometric microliths like triangles and trapezes. Mace heads, hammer stones, and bones of both wild and domesticated animals were discovered. Baghor II in the Son Valley also exhibited a Mesolithic phase. The tools found there were made of chert and chalcedony, with the occurrence of geometric microliths. Mesolithic tools, including blades and geometric microliths, were primarily crafted from chalcedony at Bhimbetka.

- ◆ *Baghor II: Geometric Microliths and Stone Tool Working*

- ◆ *Mesolithic Fishing Communities*

Coastal Mesolithic communities near Mumbai utilized marine resources and left behind microlithic sites. Other regions in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Goa, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu also revealed microliths, predominantly made of milky quartz. These findings suggest the presence of Mesolithic fishing communities along the east coast of India. Additionally, rock shelters, hilltops, river valleys, and lakesides were inhabited during the Mesolithic period.

2.2.3 Mesolithic Tools and Technology

- ◆ *Microliths- Types and Materials*

As mentioned earlier, the Mesolithic era witnessed the emergence of small, geometric, and non-geometric tools known as microliths. These tools were often attached to wooden, bone, or antler handles for enhanced functionality. Microliths varied in size, ranging from less than 1 cm to 5 cm in length. They were primarily crafted from crypto-crystalline silica stones like quartzite, chert, chalcedony, jasper, and agate, using short parallel-sided blades. Within the realm of microliths, one can find miniature versions of upper Paleolithic tool types, including burins, points, and scrapers. However, there was also a notable introduction of tools with regular geometric shapes such as lunates (crescents), triangles, rhomboids, trapezes, and trapezoids. Microliths are generally categorized into two types: 'geometric' and



‘non-geometric’.

◆ *Usage of
Microliths*

While some microliths may have been utilized as standalone tools, many were likely hafted onto wooden or bone handles, either individually or in groups, to create composite tools. In certain cases, the original handles have been preserved. Microliths were employed in the production of spearheads, arrowheads, knives, daggers, sickles, and adzes. It is plausible that poisonous substances were applied to microlithic tips and barbs to enhance the lethal effect of these weapons. Additionally, microliths were embedded in wooden structures to fashion sickles for harvesting plants.

2.2.4 Mesolithic Art, Life and Culture

◆ *Mesolithic Rock
Art sites*

During the Mesolithic period, there were few examples of portable art. However, a notable discovery was an engraved chert core with a geometric design found in Chandravati, Rajasthan. Additionally, a few bone objects with engravings have been unearthed at locations like Bhimbetka. The first rock paintings in India were discovered by A. C. L. Carlleyle, an assistant surveyor with the Archaeological Survey of India, in 1867-68 at Sohagighat in the Kaimur hills of present-day Mirzapur district, Uttar Pradesh. Currently, over 150 Mesolithic rock art sites have been identified throughout the subcontinent, with Central India being particularly rich in such sites. These paintings provide valuable insights into the lives of Mesolithic communities and exhibit thematic similarities across the country.

◆ *Discovery of
Bhimbetka*

In 1957, V. S. Wakankar made an accidental discovery while travelling by train, leading to the magnificent rock art site known as Bhimbetka. It comprises seven hills surrounded by picturesque natural surroundings and houses 642 rock shelters, around 400 of which contain paintings, engravings, and markings. The style, theme, and weathering of the artworks indicate their antiquity. Further Mesolithic paintings have been found at sites like Kharwar, Jaora, Kathotia, and Lakhajoar in Madhya Pradesh.

Extensive research by V. S. Wakankar, Yashodhar Mathpal, and Erwin Neumayer has provided insights into the aspects of the lives of the people behind these paintings. Mathpal categorized the rock paintings into three main phases, with sub-phases within them. The initial five sub-phases belong to the Mesolithic period, the sixth represents a transitional phase, and the final three belong to the historical period.

◆ *Bhimbetka and its rock paintings*

The paintings exhibit sixteen distinct colours or shades, with white and light red being the most commonly used. These colors were derived from minerals mixed with water, animal fat, marrow, or egg white. Animal motifs of twenty-nine species such as chital, leopard, tiger, elephant, and various birds, dominate the scenes at Bhimbetka. Notably, snakes are absent from Indian Mesolithic paintings at Bhimbetka and elsewhere.

◆ *Representation of hunters and animals*

In Mesolithic art, animals are depicted in hunting scenes as well as on their own. Hunters can be seen individually or in groups, often wearing masks and headdresses adorned with antlers and horns. They are adorned with various ornaments such as necklaces, bangles, wrist bands, elbow bands, and knee bands with tassels. Some hunters carry weapons like sticks, spears, bows and arrows, or slings, while others are unarmed. Dogs can also be seen accompanying the hunters.

◆ *Realistic and abstract animal figures*

The animal figures in the art range from abstract representations to highly realistic depictions. Some animals are outlined, while others have intricate designs on their bodies. The paintings also include scenes where the internal organs of animals, including unborn offspring, are shown in an “x-ray style.” Alongside hunting scenes, there are peaceful portrayals of pregnant animals, nurturing big cats with their young, running deer, grazing buffaloes, hopping rabbits, and leaping monkeys. The scenes convey a sense of movement. Furthermore, the artwork features fantastical creatures such as the famous Bhimbetka ‘boar’ with a combination of features from different animals.

◆ *Depiction of men and women*

◆ *Gender division of labour and social activities*

The Mesolithic art also represents men and women of different ages. Men wear loincloths, possibly made of leaves, animal skins, or tree bark, while women have braided hair. Some figures appear decorated with geometric patterns, suggesting their authority. Masked dancers might represent ritual specialists. Handprints, fistprints, and fingerprints similar to modern-day auspicious markings are also found. The paintings reflect a gender-based division of labour, with men depicted as hunters and women engaged in food gathering and preparation. Food storage might have utilized basket-like containers, but pottery is not shown. Scenes of fruit and honey collection, sexual activity, and dancing are also present.

Rock art sites with prehistoric paintings and carvings have been discovered in various parts of India. In eastern India,



◆ *Rock Art sites
in Orissa and
Kerala*

over 55 rock shelters containing rock art have been identified in the western districts of Orissa, confirming Mesolithic occupation in the region. Among these, the Lekhamoda group stands out, with 12 rock shelters revealing a cultural sequence from the Mesolithic to the Chalcolithic period. Orissa's rock art showcases a combination of paintings and engravings within the same shelter, featuring non-figurative designs with emphasis on abstract and decorative patterns. Similarly, in Kerala, numerous rock art sites exhibit paintings and carvings. The Ezhuthu Guha cave in Idukki district is one of the oldest sites, portraying animals but lacking human figures. Despite assigning some paintings to the late Mesolithic phase, no Mesolithic tools have been found in Kerala's rock shelters. Rock art provides valuable insights into the lives and artistic preferences of Mesolithic communities. Although hunting and gathering remained dominant, the discovery of animal bones at some sites suggests early stages of animal domestication. These rock art sites offer valuable glimpses into the ancient past and the evolving cultural practices of prehistoric societies in India.

Summarised Overview

The Mesolithic Age in India emerged approximately 10,000 years ago, during the transition from the Pleistocene to the Holocene era. This period was characterized by the use of microliths, small geometric and non-geometric tools. Microliths were crafted from crypto-crystalline silica stone and attached to handles made of wood, bone, or antler. They served various purposes, including making weapons like spearheads, arrowheads, knives, daggers, sickles, and adzes. Some microliths may have been coated with poison. They were also embedded in wooden matrices to create sickles for plant harvesting.

Excavations at Mesolithic sites in India have revealed burial systems, grave goods, and evidence of dwellings. Examples include Chopani Mando, which uncovered microliths and wattle-and-daub huts; Sarai Nahar Rai, with oblong pits containing human burials and grave goods; Mahadaha, displaying elliptical burials and evidence of tall inhabitants; Damdama, featuring microliths, human burials, and rice domestication; and Paisra, exhibiting microliths and fireplaces. Other significant Mesolithic sites include Bagor, Langhnaj, Adamgarh Hill, Baghor II, and Bhimbetka. Microliths have been found in river valleys, along the East Coast, and near Mumbai, indicating coastal and peninsular Mesolithic communities.

The rock art of India provides valuable insights into the lives and artistic preferences of prehistoric communities. Mesolithic rock art sites, with over 150 examples, were discovered throughout the country. Bhimbetka, a renowned site in Madhya Pradesh, contains nearly 400 rock shelters adorned with paintings, engravings, and bruising. These artworks depict animals, hunting scenes, and hunters adorned with various ornaments. The paintings reflect the division of labour based on gender and showcase vibrant colours made from minerals mixed with water, animal fat, marrow, or egg white. In addition to Bhimbetka, Orissa and Kerala also boast rock art sites with abstract patterns, decorative designs, and depictions of animals. Animal domestication also began during this time. Overall, the study of the Mesolithic Age in India, its tools, burial practices, rock art, and cultural developments, offers valuable insights into the lives of ancient communities and their interactions with the environment.

Self Assessment

1. Mention the primary characteristic that distinguished the Mesolithic tool technology.
2. Define microliths.
3. What does the discovery of microliths on the East Coast of India suggest?
4. Describe the significance of Bhimbetka in the Mesolithic context.
5. What is the predominant theme observed in Mesolithic rock paintings at Bhimbetka?
6. What do some of the Bhimbetka paintings in the 'x-ray style' depict?

Assignments

1. Discuss how the Mesolithic period is distinguished from the lifestyle, tool technology and subsistence strategies of the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods.
2. Describe the tool technology of the Mesolithic period.
3. Discuss the significance of the Bhimbetka rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh as a Mesolithic archaeological site in India.
4. Elaborate on the burial rituals and practices of the Mesolithic age. Provide a comprehensive account of these customs.



- Investigate the role of art and rock paintings in the Mesolithic period of India and their significance in understanding the socio-cultural context of the period.
- Analyze the material culture of the Mesolithic period in India in terms of the stone tools, pottery, and other artefacts found at Mesolithic sites.

Suggested Readings

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.





Neolithic and Chalcolithic Context in India

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ◆ describe the features of Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in India
- ◆ identify the key features of tool-making and important sites of these periods
- ◆ explain different cultures that emerged during these periods

Background

As we discussed in the previous units, the Paleolithic period in India dates back to approximately 2.5 million years ago and is characterized by the use of stone tools for hunting, fishing, and gathering. The Mesolithic period followed the Paleolithic period and was marked by the emergence of a more settled way of life. People during this time began to live in caves and rock shelters, and the use of microliths, or small stone tools, became prevalent. The Mesolithic period in India saw the emergence of different cultures, such as the Bhimbetka rock shelters in Madhya Pradesh, which feature paintings and carvings that provide insight into the daily lives of people during this time. The period followed by this is the Neolithic period, which marked the transition from a nomadic, hunter-gatherer lifestyle to settled agriculture and complex social structures. The Chalcolithic period in India followed the Neolithic period and was characterised by the use of copper and other metals, in addition to stone tools, for agriculture and other activities. The archaeological evidence from these periods provides us with valuable insights into the lives of our ancestors and their contribution to the cultural and technological heritage of India. In this unit, let us explore the key features of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures of India, focusing on their material culture, settlement patterns, and social organisation.

Keywords

Neolithic Revolution, Ahar Culture, Malwa Culture, Kayatha Culture, Savalda Culture, Ganeshwar-Jodhpura Culture, Chalcolithic Culture



Discussion

2.3.1 Neolithic Revolution

◆ *Domestication and the Neolithic Revolution*

In the classification of the Stone Age, the Neolithic Age is characterized by significant advancements in stone tool technology, particularly the development of ground, pecked, and polished stone tools, as well as the introduction of food production. These changes in stone tools were closely related to shifts in subsistence strategies. Additional defining characteristics of the Neolithic phase include the emergence of pottery, a higher degree of sedentary lifestyles, the formation of small and relatively self-sufficient village communities, and the establishment of labour divisions based on gender. V. Gordon Childe coined the term “Neolithic Revolution” to emphasize the immense importance of these transformative developments. This revolution occurred gradually and recurred multiple times across different regions, yielding diverse features and outcomes. The beginning of animal and plant domestication did not mark the end of the hunting and gathering way of life. Communities engaged in animal rearing and agriculture often continued to rely on hunting and foraging for sustenance. Furthermore, numerous communities retained their hunting and gathering practices, without transitioning to domestication at all. Childe argued that approximately 10,000 years ago, parts of West Asia experienced a drier climate due to a northward shift of the summer rains. This desiccation led to the concentration of human settlements, plants, and animals in proximity to water resources like rivers and oases. Consequently, this enforced proximity led to new relationships of dependence among humans, plants, and animals, ultimately resulting in the process of domestication.

◆ *Sedentary living and pottery*

The Neolithic age is commonly characterized by the development of food production, pottery, and a sedentary lifestyle. In the Indian subcontinent, certain aspects associated with the Neolithic period can be traced back to the preceding Mesolithic phase. Archaeological evidence reveals the presence of pottery and animal domestication at specific Mesolithic sites. Also, there exist Neolithic sites where pottery is absent. Moreover, the matter of sedentism, or the practice of settled living, is also complex. Some Mesolithic hunter-gatherer communities displayed a relatively sedentary lifestyle, while certain communities engaged in animal and plant domestication did not live in the same location for long periods.



◆ *Chalcolithic period - A transitional phase*

The Chalcolithic period refers to that part of Old World prehistory wedged between the first farming societies called Neolithic and the urban and literate societies of the Bronze Age. The Chalcolithic, a name derived from the Greek word: *khalkós*, “copper”, and from *líthos*, “stone”, or Copper Age, also known as the Eneolithic or Aeneolithic (from Latin *aeneus* “of copper”), is an archaeological period that researchers now regard as part of the broader Neolithic. Earlier scholars defined it as a transitional period between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age.

◆ *Naming of archaeological cultures*

Many cultures are often named after the locations where they were initially discovered. In some cases, these cultures are also identified by a specific pottery type. It is important to note that the presence of a diagnostic pottery type does not imply that it is the only pottery type associated with that culture. Rather, it serves as a distinctive marker for identification purposes. Cultures can also be named after the region in which they are concentrated. This does not necessarily mean that their sites are not found outside that particular area. For example, sites affiliated with the Malwa culture can also be found outside of Malwa, such as in Maharashtra. Similarly, certain Ahar culture sites extend beyond their primary zone in southeast Rajasthan and can be located in Malwa. These archaeological cultures share a variety of associated material remains, but the extent of their shared characteristics beyond material culture is subject to interpretation.

◆ *South Indian neolithic context: Ash mound sites and cattle pens*

The Neolithic context in South India is closely linked to ash mound sites, characterized by substantial accumulations of ash and vitrified materials resulting from the repeated burning of cow dung heaps. These mounds serve as indicators of Neolithic cattle pens, enclosed by heavy structures constructed from tree trunks. While certain Neolithic pens were affiliated with permanent settlements, others likely functioned as temporary encampments. The cyclic burning of dung heaps may have been associated with seasonal festivals, symbolizing the commencement or conclusion of annual migrations towards forest grazing grounds.

2.3.2 Neolithic Sites

Mehrgarh

The Neolithic transition in Baluchistan is exemplified

- ◆ *Nomadic pastoral life to settled agriculture*

by sites, notably Mehrgarh, where a shift from semi-nomadic pastoralism to settled agriculture occurred. Mehrgarh, located in the Bolan Valley of the Kachi plain, served as a crucial link between the Indus plains and the mountainous valleys of north Baluchistan. Excavations at Mehrgarh revealed scattered ancient settlements across an approximately 200-hectare area, including a low mound and its surroundings. Mehrgarh provides evidence of two major occupation periods spanning approximately 5,000 to 6,000 years. The first period, dating from the 8th to the 6th millennium BCE, featured an aceramic (without pottery) Neolithic phase. Stone blades, such as lunates and triangles, were prominent tools, possibly mounted on wooden hafts using bitumen mastic. Wheat, barley, sheep, and goats were gradually domesticated during this phase.

- ◆ *Various phases of Neolithic occupation in Mehrgarh*

The second period, from the 5th to the 4th (and possibly 3rd) millennium BCE, witnessed the emergence of pottery and agricultural advancements. Cattle, specifically *Bos indicus*, became dominant, and granaries with small regular compartments appeared, indicating surplus crop production. Elaborate burials featuring funerary chambers and the first hand-modelled clay figurines also emerged. Mehrgarh's evidence illustrates early agricultural settlements with domestic architecture and established crafts. Seashells and semi-precious stones indicate trade networks extended from the coast and possibly Central Asia. Period II saw significant changes, likely triggered by tectonic events around 5500 BCE. Silt deposition buried the original mound, but elements of the earlier culture persisted in altered forms. Pottery usage increased, granary structures expanded, and monumental architecture emerged. Copper and ivory crafts indicate technological advancements. The settlement area expanded to accommodate a growing population.

Kile Gul Mohammad and Damb Sadaat

The Bolan Pass leads from Mehrgarh into the Quetta Valley, where there are a number of sites. Two notable excavated sites in this region are Kile Gul Mohammad and Damb Sadaat. Kile Gul Mohammad, situated approximately 3.2 km from Quetta city along the Hannah River, has revealed four occupation periods (KGM I-IV). Radiocarbon dates suggest the settlement dates back to around 5500 BCE, with Neolithic occupation between 5000 and 4500 BCE.



- ◆ *KGM I-IV periods of occupation*

During this phase, no pottery was found, but remains of domesticated animals were discovered. Kile Gul Mohammad transitioned from nomadic pastoralism to mud or wattle-and-daub houses by the end of Period I. Excavations unearthed microliths, blades made from chert, jasper, and chalcedony, as well as handcrafted pottery in subsequent periods. KGM III witnessed the use of wheel-made pottery, including black-on-red ware with geometric designs. Mud-brick houses resting on stone foundations were also identified, and Period III marked the introduction of copper objects.

- ◆ *Kechi Beg Ware pottery*
- ◆ *Quetta ware and Faiz Mohammad Grey Ware*

KGM IV and Damb Sadaat's DS I shared cultural similarities. Kechi Beg Ware, a distinct well-fired buff-coloured pottery adorned with black geometric designs, was found during this period. At Damb Sadaat, calibrated dates place Period II around 3000 BCE, revealing multi-roomed mud-brick structures with limestone foundations. Quetta ware, characterized by black-painted designs on buff-coloured pottery, was prominent, alongside Faiz Mohammad Grey Ware. Terracotta figurines, models, and various artefacts were also discovered.

Rana Ghundai, Nal and Kulli

- ◆ *Rana Ghundai excavation*
- ◆ *Nal pottery and Kulli pottery*

The excavations at Rana Ghundai revealed five occupation levels. Period I, dating from 4500 to 4300 BCE, represented a semi-nomadic settlement with handmade plain pottery, animal bones, microliths, and bone artefacts. In Period II, wheel-made pottery emerged with painted friezes of bulls. Period III saw stylistic changes in pottery decoration. Nal, a site which links north and south Baluchistan, featured polychrome pottery with diverse shapes, disc bases, and painted designs including geometric and naturalistic motifs. Artefacts at Nal encompassed stone objects, silver foil, beads of various materials, copper items, and a copper alloyed adze. Although lacking radiocarbon dates, Nal pottery corresponds to Periods I and II of Damb Sadaat. Kulli in the Kolwa tract revealed multi-roomed stone structures and artefacts such as stone tools, semi-precious stone beads, bone bangles, and a small quantity of copper, gold, and glass. Kulli pottery was highly ornamented, often depicting elongated cattle in a landscape.

Bala Kot

Bala Kot, situated on the Makran coast of south Baluchistan, represents a Neolithic occupation during the late 5th to

- ◆ *Cultivation of barley and animal domestication*

early 3rd millennium BCE. The houses were constructed using mud bricks, while the wheel-made pottery exhibited similarities to Nal. Discoveries included microliths, terracotta figurines of humped bulls, beads made of stone, lapis lazuli, shell, and paste, as well as terracotta, shell, and bone artefacts. A limited number of copper objects were also recovered. Evidence suggests the cultivation of barley and the domestication of cattle, sheep, and goats. Additionally, the remains of buffalo, deer, pig, and hare were found. Other early village sites in the Makran area include Miri Qalat and Shahi Tump.

Hakra Wares Sites

- ◆ *Hakra wares*

In the Cholistan desert of Bahawalpur, early village settlements were located on the alluvial plain of the Ghaggar-Hakra River, a former river system. These settlements featured handmade and wheel-made pottery known as Hakra wares, characterized by mud-coated vessels with incised lines or black slips. The sizes of the settlements varied, ranging from small campsites to larger, more permanent settlements with indications of craft specialization. Artefacts found at Hakra wares sites included microliths, grinding stones, terracotta cattle figurines, shell and terracotta bangles, and copper fragments. Hakra wares were also discovered beyond the Ghaggar-Hakra valley, such as at Jalilpur near the Ravi River in the Punjab plains. Fishing played a significant role in the subsistence of the people, as evidenced by terracotta net sinkers. Sheep, goats, cattle, and gazelle bones were also recovered.

- ◆ *Ravi aspect of the Hakra phase*

Harappa, situated along the Ravi River, has provided the evidence of the Ravi aspect of the Hakra phase dating from approximately 3500/3300 to 2800 BCE. Remains of a small village with wooden post huts and plastered reed walls were found, along with pottery, stone and bone tools, necklaces, terracotta spindle whorls, and bangles made of shell and terracotta. Potsherds with pre-firing marks and post-firing graffiti provided valuable evidence of the formative stage of the Harappan script.

Kunal in Haryana yielded Hakra wares in its early levels, showcasing pottery designs with pipal leaves and multiple-horned bulls. Artefacts included bone tools, chalcedony micro-blades, copper fishhooks, and arrowheads. **Bhirrana**, located in the Fatehabad district of Haryana, belonged to the Hakra wares culture during Period IA. The site revealed



- ◆ *Kunal and Bhirrana*

shallow mud-plastered pit dwellings, pits used for sacrifice and industrial activities, and refuse pits. Apart from Hakra wares, various other pottery types were identified. Artefacts encompassed carnelian, agate, jasper, and lapis lazuli beads, terracotta bangles, sling balls, tools like querns and pestles, crucibles, clay toys, and chert blades with bone points.
- ◆ *Cultural continuity*

Koldihwa, located on the northern fringes of the Vindhyas in the Prayagraj district of Uttar Pradesh, is an excavated site displaying cultural continuity from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Rice remains and imprints were discovered, indicating the presence of both wild and cultivated rice. Stone blades, polished stone celts, chert microliths, grinding tools, and bone implements were also found. Handmade pottery consisted of net-marked or cord-marked, plain red, and black-and-red ware.
- ◆ *Huts, pottery, and domesticated animals*

Mahagara, situated on the right bank of the Belan River, is another significant Neolithic site. Evidence of huts with walls made of wattle and daub was identified. Stone blades, microliths, celts, grinding tools, sling balls, pottery, bone arrowheads, terracotta beads, and animal bones were unearthed. A cattle pen with post holes and hoof marks suggested the domestication of cattle, sheep, and goats. The site yielded rice husk embedded in pottery and indicated hunting, gathering wild plant food, and domestication of plants and animals.
- ◆ *Neolithic Factory site*

Kunjhun, located in the Son valley near Koldihwa, revealed a Neolithic settlement dating back to the 4th millennium BCE. Wild and domesticated rice were discovered, and the site appeared to be a factory site specialized in manufacturing stone artefacts with evidence of heat treatment.
- ◆ *Five-fold cultural sequence*

Lahuradeva, in the Sant Kabir Nagar district of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, displayed a five-fold cultural sequence spanning the Neolithic to the early centuries CE. Neolithic Period I featured cord-impressed red ware and black and red ware pottery, along with wattle-and-daub houses. Rice husk marks embedded in potsherds indicated domesticated rice. Radiocarbon dating placed Period IA at Lahuradeva in the late 6th and early 5th millennia BCE.

2.3.3 Neolithic – Chalcolithic Sites

Burzahom

- ◆ *Discovery of Burzahom*

The Kashmir valley has Neolithic sites near Srinagar and between Baramulla and Anantnag. Burzahom, one of the important excavated sites in this region, sits on a karewa clay terrace above the floodplain of the Jhelum River, 16 km northeast of Srinagar. Initially believed to be related to the Harappan civilization, its true importance became evident during excavations of the Archaeological Survey of India from 1960 to 1971. Burzahom encompasses four periods: two Neolithic, one megalithic, and one early historical.

- ◆ *Mud-plastered pit dwellings*
- ◆ *Ground-level houses*

Period I, radiocarbon dated before 2920 BCE, reveals mud-plastered pit dwellings with artefacts like ill-fired handmade pottery and stone and bone tools. No burials were found in Period I. In Period II, the people of Burzahom moved out of the pits and built houses on ground level. Also, Period II witnessed the presence of primary and secondary burials. Pottery included new shapes and a deluxe black burnished ware. Stone and bone tools improved craftsmanship. Hunting and fishing were crucial parts of the lives of the Neolithic people of Burzahom. This is evident from the animal bones, the engraved hunting scenes, and weaponry such as spearheads, arrowheads, and harpoons. The recent botanical analysis provided direct evidence of cultivated wheat, barley, and lentils.

Gufkral

- ◆ *Pit dwellings in Period I*

Gufkral, near Tral, exhibits a cultural sequence from the Neolithic to the historical period. Neolithic Period I consists of sub-phases IA, IB, and IC. Pit dwellings, circular or oval in shape, surrounded by storage pits and hearths, characterized Period I. Wooden posts supported grass and reed superstructures, while mud plastering prevented water and snow entry. Period IA's earlier pits had red ochre-plastered floors, some of which were enlarged or two-chambered. However, no hearths were found inside the dwelling pits.

Period IA at Gufkral lacked pottery but had polished stone tools, bone and horn tools, steatite beads, and animal bones of wild and domesticated species. Barley, wheat, and lentils were present. In Period IB, handmade grey pottery



- ◆ *Tools, animal bones and grains in Period IB*

with mat impressions emerged, alongside polished stone and bone tools. Domestication of sheep, goats, and cattle increased while hunting remained significant. Extensive use of fire was indicated by charcoal and charred wood. Period IB was dated 2468–2139 BCE.

- ◆ *Decline of hunting in Period IC*

Period IC, dating from approximately 1620 to 1300 BCE, brought wheel-made pottery, including grey, burnished grey, red, and black wares. New shapes like long-necked jars and dishes-on-stands with triangular perforations appeared. Stone and terracotta tools, spindle whorls, terracotta bangles, potsherds with graffiti marks, and a copper hairpin were discovered. Animal bones included domesticated and wild species. Grain cultivation continued while hunting declined, and animal breeding grew in importance.

Ganeshwar–Jodhpura Culture

- ◆ *Sites in Rajasthan*
- ◆ *Three cultural phases*

The Ganeshwar-Jodhpura culture thrived in northeastern Rajasthan, with over 80 identified sites, primarily in Sikar, Jaipur, and Jhunjhunu districts. This site concentration is associated with copper ore resources in Baleshwar and Khetri, where ancient copper working remnants were discovered. Jodhpura, located by the Sahibi River, was the first site to reveal evidence of this culture. The pottery there was wheel-made, ranging in colour from orange to red, with incised designs. The calibrated dates at Jodhpura span from 3309-2709 BCE and 2879-2348 BCE. Ganeshwar, near Nim-ka-Thana, later revealed similar pottery. The culture encompasses three phases: Period I (from around 3800 BCE), Period II (around 2800 BCE), and Period III (around 2000 BCE). Period I showcases a hunting-gathering community using chert and quartz microliths, with charred bones of wild animals. Period II marks the advent of metallurgy with the presence of copper objects, while both handmade and wheel-made pottery were found. Period III displays diverse pottery types, with a multitude of copper objects dominating the assemblage, accompanied by a decline in microliths and animal bones.

Ahar or Banas Culture

The Ahar or Banas culture in southeast Rajasthan spans over 90 identified sites along the Banas and Berach river systems, extending between Udaipur and Jaipur. Additional sites are found in the Malwa plateau of Madhya Pradesh. Excavations at Ahar, Gilund, and Balathal have provided

- ◆ *Sites and artefacts*
- ◆ *Significance of Gilund and Balathal*

insights into this culture. Ahar pottery is characterized by black-and-red ware with white linear and dotted designs. The sites are typically situated along river banks, ranging in size from a few hectares to over 10 hectares. The culture displays diverse raw materials used, including steatite, shell, agate, jasper, carnelian, lapis lazuli, copper, and bronze. Ahar Period I, with its multiple building phases, revealed houses made of mud, bamboo-reinforced walls, and sloping roofs. Copper objects, microliths, stone tools, and terracotta beads were found, along with rice grains and diverse animal bones. Gilund and Balathal exhibited similar features, including mud-brick structures, copper artefacts, terracotta figurines, and varied pottery types. Balathal showcased circular huts, mud fortifications, rectangular houses, kilns, and a wide range of pottery styles, along with abundant copper artefacts, bone tools, stone implements, and diverse animal and plant remains.

Kayatha Culture

- ◆ *Pottery Types of the Kayatha Culture*

The Kayatha culture, named after the Kayatha site in Ujjain district, thrived during the latter half of the 3rd millennium BCE. Excavations at this site revealed three pottery types. Kayatha pottery, characterized by its fine, sturdy, wheel-made ware, featured a thick brown slip, painted with violet or deep red linear designs on the upper part of the vessel. It included bowls, basins, vases, and large storage jars. Buff ware with red linear and geometric designs was also found, comprising lotas, concave-necked jars, and basins. A third type, called "combed ware," had fine fabric with wavy and zigzag lines.

- ◆ *House construction*

The Kayatha culture's dwellings were constructed with mud and reed, with mud-plastered floors. The remains of domesticated cattle, horses, and tortoises indicated their presence, while no grain remains were found. Stone tools like microliths made from local chalcedony were abundant, along with a possible agricultural implement. The culture excelled in copper technology, evident from copper axes, a chisel, copper bangles, and necklaces made of agate, carnelian, and crystal, found within a concentrated area, potentially a house.

Malwa culture

Navdatoli near Narmada banks is a known and largest settlement of Malwa culture. Daimabad, Inamgaon, Maheshwar, Kayatha, Nagda and Eran are some of the



◆ *Features of Malwa culture sites*

major sites belonging to this culture. The Malwa culture has been extended from Central India to the Deccan region. The malwa pottery was black or dark brown and had an orange slip. It had geometric designs and motifs of plants, animals and humans painted on it. The houses were circular or oblong and made of wattle and daub method in which the floors were plastered with lime. There was evidence of mud brick usage and mud walls at several Malwa culture sites. They have used copper and stone to make artefacts. Microliths made of chalcedony, carnelian, agate, jasper and quartz were used. The even distribution of tools indicates the making of tools at every household in Navdatoli. Beads of semi-precious stones such as terracotta, amazonite, faience, glass, steatite, agate, lapis lazuli, carnelian, chalcedony, jasper, and shell, have been found. There were also plant remains such as barley, wheat, lentils, black gram and linseed. The animal remains found from the Malwa sites include the bones of wild deer, cattle, goat, sheep and pig.

◆ *Evidence of ritualistic activity- fire altars*

The religious or ritualistic activities of the Malwa culture is identified from the evidence of charred wooden posts found at Navdatoli. Those pits at the four corners are recognised as fire altars which is considered to be a site of sacrificial performances. There were also bull figurines and burials found at these sites.

◆ *Jorwe culture sites*

Jorwe Culture

Jorwe culture is named after the site, **Jorwe** in Ahmednagar district of Gujarat. Jorwe culture sites existed in the large areas of Maharashtra. Prakash in the Tapi Valley, Daimabad in the Pravara - Godavari Valley and Inamgaon in the Bhima Valley are identified as the Jorwe culture sites. All these sites were considered as permanent agricultural settlements and Out of which, Inamgaon and Daimabad are largely excavated.

◆ *Burial system and animal domestication*

Jorwe pottery is identified with geometric designs painted in black on red. These pottery were well fired and wheel made. Pottery kilns are found from Inamgaon. The pottery types include coarse, handmade red and grey wares. Spouted jar, carinated bowl, basins, cups and storage jars were found at Jorwe culture sites. Other artefacts including microliths, beads, copper objects and terracotta figurines were also identified from these sites. The burials identified to Jorwe culture contain urn burials and pit burials. The houses found were in rectangular and circular shapes. Fire pits were identified in these houses. The subsistence mode of Jorwe

people were hunting , fishing and farming. Evidence of animal domestication is also received from these sites. The animal remains were of buffalo, cattle, goat, sheep, pig and horse. Other faunal remains include those of deer, ass and antelope. The plant remains of barley, wheat, lentils, grass pea and rice were found at Jorwe culture sites.

Savalda Culture

The Savalda culture, named after the site of Savalda in the Tapi Valley, represents the earliest agricultural society in the western Deccan. Dating back to the 3rd millennium BCE, this culture flourished in the region between the Tapi and Godavari rivers in northern Maharashtra. The distinctive Savalda pottery, crafted on a potter's wheel, features a chocolate-colored hue with a medium to coarse fabric and a thick, crackled slip. The pottery encompasses a range of shapes, including high-necked jars, dishes, bowls, basins, vases, beakers, and knobbed lids, adorned with painted designs depicting tools, weapons, and geometric motifs.

- ◆ *Unique pottery designs*

Kaothe, a site associated with the Savalda culture, featured round or oval dwellings with sloping roofs, indicating a short-term, nomadic settlement. Excavations uncovered bone tools, shell beads, and a range of plant remains, including millet and pulses. The sturdy Savalda pottery found at Kaothe displayed geometric and naturalistic designs. Daimabad, in Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district, represented a settled phase of the Savalda culture. The excavations revealed mud houses with hearths, storage pits, jars, and occasional courtyards. Stone and bone artefacts, along with the shell, carnelian, steatite, and terracotta beads, were discovered. An agate phallus-shaped object was among the notable findings. Plant remains indicated the cultivation of wheat, barley, peas, lentils, black gram, and green gram.

- ◆ *Bone tools and pottery found at Kaothe*
- ◆ *Daimabad excavation*

Sohagaura

Sohagaura, located in Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh, is an archaeological site covering around 60 hectares. Excavations revealed a cultural sequence spanning from the Neolithic to the Medieval period. During the earliest Neolithic phase (Period I), fragments of handmade pottery with coarse or medium fabric were found, displaying rustic or cord-impressed designs.

- ◆ *Excavation at Sohagaura and the findings*



Chirand

◆ *Excavation findings of Chirand*

In northern Bihar, excavations at sites such as Chirand, Senuar, Chechar-Kutubpur, Maner, and Taradih have uncovered Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic villages dating back to the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE. These settlements were situated near streams and featured well-established agriculture. Chirand, situated at the confluence of the Sarayu and Ganga rivers, is a significant mound. Stone tools made from quartzite, basalt, and granite, including celts, hammer stones, and microlithic blades, were discovered. Bone and antler implements, as well as terracotta figurines and ornaments, were also found. Pottery at Chirand included red, grey, black, and black-and-red wares with painted and scratched designs. The circular wattle-and-daub huts had rammed floors and hearths, some with communal cooking ovens. Plant remains indicated the cultivation of rice, wheat, barley, and lentils, while animal bones revealed a mix of wild and domesticated species, indicating hunting, fishing, and animal husbandry practices.

Chechar-Kutubpur

◆ *Three phases of Neolithic deposit*

Chechar-Kutubpur, located near Biddupur on the banks of the Ganges, is an archaeological site with a Neolithic deposit divided into three phases (A, B, and C) based on pottery changes. Circular wattle-and-daub huts with mud floors and hearths were found. Excavations yielded bone and antler tools, as well as micro-beads of steatite and chalcedony.

Senuar

◆ *Four periods of occupation*

Senuar, located in Rohtas district of Bihar, witnessed Neolithic (IA and IB), Chalcolithic, NBPW, and early centuries CE periods. Period IA featured wattle-and-daub houses with three pottery types and stone tools. Domesticated animals included cattle, buffalo, sheep, goats, pigs, cats, and dogs. Carbonized grains show that people grew two crops a year. Rice, barley, wheat, millet, lentil, and peas were grown. Period IB combined Neolithic and Chalcolithic features, with well-rammed earth floors, copper objects, improved pottery with red ochre-coloured paintings, and increased decoration. Stone tools and shell ornaments were abundant, along with terracotta artefacts. Plant remains included bread wheat, chickpea or gram, and moong.

Maner, Taradih, Utnur and Watgal

The Maner site, near Patna along an old Ganges course,

- ◆ *Pottery techniques, tool diversity and burial practices*

yielded a Neolithic deposit with handmade red ware, burnished red and grey wares, and various pottery shapes. Taradih, close to Bodh Gaya, had two Neolithic phases with burnished and unburnished red wares, cord-impressed wares, and burnished grey ware with ochre-colored paintings. Utnur in Telangana showed a small number of ground stone axes, stone blades, and coarse pottery with burnished grey or buff ware. Watgal in north Karnataka had a microlithic industry in Period I and increased tool diversity in Period IIA. Pottery included ill-fired red and grey wares, burnished grey ware with red ochre paintings, and marine shell beads. Watgal's Period IIB featured urns and extended burials with pots as grave goods, diverse artefacts, and terracotta figurines. Two carbonized seeds of betel nut were found. This is the earliest evidence of the use of betel nuts in South Asia.

Budihal

- ◆ *Ash mounds and habitational deposits*

The excavation of Budihal in Karnataka aimed to understand the ash mounds and their ecological context. The site, located on a sandstone plateau with thin brown soil, consisted of four localities, each with an ash mound and a habitation deposit. One locality revealed a large area covered with chert tools and waste material, indicating a chert blade-working area. Excavations in Locality I showed that the ash deposits were central, with a cattle penning area on the east and a cow dung disposal area on the west. Structures in the habitation area included a chert working platform, a pottery storage area, and round dwelling units with low stone walls. Artefacts found included pottery, ground stone tools, chert blades, bone tools, and beads. A total of 10 child burials were also discovered.

- ◆ *Subsistence practices at Budihal*

The excavation revealed the presence of wild plant seeds and domesticated horse gram grains. Faunal remains indicated a focus on cattle rearing, with bones of domesticated cattle being the most common. Bones of wild animals such as nilgai, blackbuck, antelope, and reptiles were also found. A butchering area was identified within the settlement. Radiocarbon dates placed the ash mound and habitation area at Budihal between 2180 and 1600 BCE.

Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) Culture

Ochre coloured Pottery culture is known after a ceramic type. This culture was discovered at Western Uttar Pradesh



◆ *OCP sites*

in 1950. The pottery is a wheel made, ill-fired and designed with red and black colours. The pottery leaves an ochre colour when it is rubbed, hence the name. OCP was found mainly at doab, especially in the districts of Western Uttar Pradesh-Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Saharanpur and Bulandshahr. Many OCP sites are also discovered at Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab. The Ochre Coloured Pottery (OCP) are found in different archaeological sites in India such as Hastinapura, Ahichchhatra, Jhijnhana, Atranjikhhera, Noh, Bargaon, and Ambakheri.

◆ *OCP and Harappan pottery*

◆ *Subsistence base of OCP people*

The OCP level is followed by a break in occupation and a change to a different kind of pottery such as Painted Grey Ware (PGW) or Black and Red Ware (BRW), and then a PGW level. However, scholars have different opinions on whether OCP is related to the late Harappan pottery tradition, as some of them think it is a less advanced form of the Harappan pottery, while others see it as a separate tradition that was influenced by the Harappan pottery in some regions. The OCP can be split into two main groups. A western zone containing sites such as Jodhpura, Siswal, Mitathal, Bara, Ambakheri, and Bargaon, which are related to the Harappan tradition. Then there is eastern zone containing sites such as Lal Qila, Atranjikhhera, and Saipai, that are not related to the Harappan tradition. Evidence of wattle and daub houses are found at sites such as Lal Qila, Atranjikhhera, Jodhpura and Daulatpur. Stone and copper objects are found at the OCP sites. The subsistence pattern of OCP people included hunting, animal husbandry, and agriculture.

◆ *Copper Hoards*

Copper Hoards are found in upper Ganga Valley to Bengal and Orissa. It was also discovered in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and also some of it in Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Doab region of Uttar Pradesh had the largest concentration of copper hoards. Gungeria in Madhya Pradesh had evidence of 424 objects in a single hoard along with 102 silver objects. Objects such as flat celts, bar celts, harpoons, shouldered celts, antennae swords and anthropomorphic figures are found in the copper hoards.

2.3.4 Neolithic Life and Culture

The Neolithic stage is often characterized by self-sufficient village communities where food production is in balance with the population. However, food is not only a matter of sustenance but obtaining and consumption of food is generally a social activity. Food items may be a part of

- ◆ *Self-sufficient village communities*
- ◆ *Social organization and subsistence patterns*

systems of hospitality, gift-giving, trade, and social customs. Food preferences and preparation methods play important roles in both family and social contexts. The excavation site at Budihall provides a vivid portrayal of community food preparation and feasting during the Neolithic period. Neolithic sites vary in terms of social organization, with smaller communities displaying simpler structures and larger sites representing more complex societies. Subsistence patterns differ based on the available resources and environmental adaptations. Variations in material culture, such as tools, pottery, and housing, indicate distinct craft traditions and lifestyles. Burial practices and objects of cultic significance reflect diverse belief systems and customs.

- ◆ *Sedentary life and population growth*

The transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture had a significant impact. Some hunting-gathering groups exhibited elements of sedentary living, while farmers and pastoralists maintained migratory lifestyles. The exact sequence of sedentary living and agriculture remains debated, but the long-term trend shows increased sedentariness. Sedentary living established enduring relationships between people and their environments, offering stable conditions for childbirth and contributing to higher birth rates and reduced death rates. As a result, population growth occurred, leading to changes in community age profiles.

- ◆ *Crafts and urban interaction*

Although the Neolithic stage primarily revolved around subsistence activities, evidence of specialized crafts and long-distance trade is found at sites like Mehrgarh. Sites such as Kunjhun and Ganeshwar showcase well-developed craft traditions and specialized areas within settlements for various activities. This indicates collective decisions by community members in organizing space and activities. Earlier sections also highlight interactions between some Neolithic communities and proto-urban or urban cultures.

- ◆ *Political organization*

As settled communities grew in size, they would have had to devise new ways and norms of interaction and cooperation, distinct from those of hunter-gatherer bands. Early farming and pastoralist communities likely had internal differentiation based on age and gender, and evidence suggests the existence of social hierarchies at some sites, as seen in variations in house sizes and grave goods. Larger groups would have required effective political control and organization to regulate economic activities and social relations.



◆ *Significance of burial practices*

Burial practices in the Neolithic period imply significance attached to the bodily remains of the deceased. The orientation and form of burials revealed funerary customs within the community, with multiple burials suggesting kinship ties or simultaneous deaths. There are evidence to rituals such as the use of red ochre prior to burial and joint burials of humans and animals. The size of graves reflected differences in customs associated with social ranks. The inclusion of food items among grave goods indicated a belief in the afterlife. Secondary burials indicated multi-stage funerary practices.

◆ *Adaptation, coexistence and interaction*

The Neolithic - Chalcolithic societies exhibited chronological and environmental variations. Food-producing villages emerged in Baluchistan and the northern fringes of the Vindhya between 7000 and 3000 BCE. The number of settlements increased in 3000 and 2000 BCE. Hunting and gathering did not disappear with the advent of animal and plant domestication. This period saw coexistence and interaction among different communities, including Neolithic, Neolithic-Chalcolithic, Rural Chalcolithic, Urban Chalcolithic, and hunter-gatherer groups. The significance of food production lay not only in its immediate effects but also in the potential for future changes. In certain areas, it led to the development of proto-urban settlements and cities in certain regions.

Summarised Overview

The Neolithic Age brought significant advancements in stone tool technology and the establishment of sedentary lifestyles. V. Gordon Childe coined the term “Neolithic revolution” to describe this transformative period, marked by the invention of pottery, the emergence of small village communities, and a division of labour based on gender. The Chalcolithic period served as a transition between the Neolithic and Bronze Age, characterized by the use of copper and stone tools. Archaeological cultures were named after sites, pottery types, or regions, such as the Malwa and Ahar cultures. In South India, the Neolithic context was identified through ash mound sites and cattle pens, marking the beginning or end of annual migrations.

Mehrgarh in Baluchistan is the oldest known Neolithic site, revealing a shift from semi-nomadic pastoralism to settled agriculture over a span of five to six

thousand years. The site demonstrates changes in architecture, pottery, agriculture, crafts, and trade networks, suggesting connections with coastal and Central Asian regions. Other Neolithic sites like Kile Gul Mohammad, Damb Sadaat, Rana Ghundai, Nal, Kulli, Bala Kot, and the Hakra Wares sites in Pakistan have yielded valuable artefacts and pottery. Jalilpur, Harappa, Kunal, and Bhirrana also provide evidence of Hakra wares and other artefacts. Sites like Koldihwa, Mahagara, Kunjhun, and Lahuradeva show the continuity and development of the Neolithic period, including domestication of plants and animals, stone tool production, and the use of wattle-and-daub houses.

Burzahom, a Neolithic-Chalcolithic site, displays four periods of occupation dating back to before c. 2920 BCE. Period I featured mud-plastered pit dwellings and ill-fired, handmade, coarse pottery, while Period II saw the people of Burzahom move to ground-level houses and practice both inhumation and secondary burials. Gufkral reveals a cultural sequence spanning from the Neolithic to the historical period. Gufkral reveals the use of pit dwellings, a-ceramic tools, the introduction of pottery, and the transition to wheel-made pottery with animal domestication and agricultural practices.

Various Neolithic-Chalcolithic cultures, including Ganeshwar-Jodhpura, Ahar, Malwa, Jorwe, Savalda, and Kayatha, exhibit distinctive characteristics. For example, Ganeshwar-Jodhpura is known for its pottery, metallurgy, and the use of chert and quartz microliths. The Ahar culture utilizes a wide range of raw materials, including steatite, shell, agate, jasper, carnelian, lapis lazuli, copper, and bronze. Kayatha showcases different pottery types and mud and reed houses. The culture had a rich repertoire of stone and copper artefacts, with copper axes, bangles, and necklaces found in a small area of what must have been a house. The Savalda culture represents the earliest farming culture in the western Deccan, with wheel-made pottery featuring painted designs. Other sites like Kaothe, Daimabad, and Sohagaura also contribute to our understanding of the Neolithic period.

Excavations at Chirand in North Bihar have uncovered circular huts, tools, pottery, ornaments, beads, terracotta figurines, and plant and animal remains, suggesting the presence of agricultural villages in the Gangetic plains during the 3rd/2nd millennium BCE. Additionally, several other Neolithic and Chalcolithic sites in Bihar provide evidence of early agriculture, including rice cultivation. Budihal's excavation reveals a 4,000-year-old Neolithic settlement with a central ash deposit used for cattle penning. The Neolithic period witnessed the emergence of self-sustaining village communities, leading to sedentary lifestyles, specialized crafts, and new social dynamics.



Self Assessment

1. Write a short note on the 'Neolithic Revolution'.
2. What does the term 'aceramic Neolithic' mean?
3. What do the ash mound sites in the south Indian Neolithic context signify?
4. What is the significance of Mehrgarh in the Neolithic context?
5. List five neolithic sites and their features.
6. Mention the Neolithic - Chalcolithic cultures named after the sites.
7. Write a short note on Jorwe culture.
8. What do you know about the Ahar culture?
9. What is the significance of Burzahom in the neolithic site context?
10. Which neolithic sites have yielded evidence of ten child burials?

Assignments

1. Discuss the settlement and subsistence pattern of the neolithic cultures of India.
2. Explain why the Neolithic period is called the 'Neolithic revolution'.
3. Explain the features of Chalcolithic cultures in India.
4. Elaborate on the major characteristics of the neolithic period in India with a special focus on the advent of food production.
5. Analyse the Neolithic artefacts and describe the social organization and trade networks of the Neolithic period.

Suggested Readings

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5. Sankalia, H. D, *The Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan*, Taraporevala Sons & Co, Bombay, 1974.

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5. Thapar, B.K., *Recent Archaeological Discoveries in India*, UNESCO, 1985.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.





Indus Civilization and Westerly Trade

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ♦ describe the key features of the Indus Valley civilization including their trade relations
- ♦ identify different phases of the Indus civilization and its major sites
- ♦ evaluate the reasons behind the decline of the Indus Valley civilization

Background

In the previous units, you have learned the evolution of human beings from hunting-gathering to agricultural communities. The advent of food production paved the way for the emergence of cities, which further led to the rise of civilizations. In India, the period around 3000 BCE to 600 BCE is known as the Proto-historic period. It covers the Bronze Age and Chalcolithic culture from the beginning of the Harappan civilization up to the beginning of the historical period in the 6th century BCE which is the period of Buddha and Mahavira.

The origin of the Indus Valley Civilization, (also known as Harappan civilization), is still a topic of debate among scholars. The civilization is believed to have emerged around 2600 BCE in the valleys of the Indus River and its tributaries in present-day Pakistan and northwest India. Some theories suggest that it was the result of indigenous development by the local population, while others propose that it may have been influenced by contact with neighbouring civilizations such as Mesopotamia and Egypt. The Harappan Civilization is notable for its features such as urban planning, agriculture, trade, and other areas, making it one of the most important civilizations of the ancient world. In this unit, let us discuss the features of the Harappan civilization and the decline of the civilization.

Keywords

Civilization, Script, Town planning, Craft, Westerly Trade, Urbanization, Bronze Age



Discussion

2.4.1 Excavations in Indus Sites

◆ *Discovery of Indus Valley civilization*

In 1921, Sir John Marshall led the initial excavations at the Harappa site in modern-day Pakistan, which exposed the civilization's outstanding urban planning, complex water management systems, and advanced architecture. Prior to Marshall's work, British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham had identified ancient mounds in the region in the mid-19th century, but it was not until Marshall's excavations that the full extent of the Indus Valley Civilization was revealed.

◆ *Sites of Indus Valley civilization*

The number of Harappan sites currently reaches approximately 1,022 in total. Among these sites, 406 are located within the borders of Pakistan, while the remaining 616 are situated in India. However, it is important to note that only a mere 97 of these sites have undergone excavations thus far. The Harappan culture zone encompasses a vast area spanning between 680,000 to 800,000 square kilometers. Prominent sites are distributed across Afghanistan, Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, and the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, as well as Jammu, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and western Uttar Pradesh in India. The northernmost site, Manda, is found in the Jammu district of Jammu and Kashmir, whereas the southernmost site, Malvan, is situated in the Surat district of southern Gujarat. The westernmost site, Sutkagen-dor, is located along the Makran coast of Pakistan, while the easternmost site, Alamgirpur, lies in the Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. It is also worth mentioning the significance of the isolated site of Shortughai in Afghanistan.

◆ *Nomenclature*

The first sites of this remarkable ancient civilization were unearthed within the Indus Valley and its tributaries. Hence, the name 'Indus Valley Civilization' or 'Indus Civilization'. However, given the extensive geographical reach of this civilization, it becomes evident that the terms 'Indus' or 'Indus Valley' are somewhat limiting. Some scholars also use the terms 'Indus-Sarasvati' or 'Sindhu-Sarasvati' civilization. This is because a considerable number of sites are situated along the banks of the Ghaggar-Hakra River, which is associated with the ancient Sarasvati mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. Nevertheless, the same objection raised against the terms 'Indus' or 'Indus Valley' civilization can also be

applied to 'Indus-Sarasvati' or 'Sindhu-Sarasvati' civilization. Since this civilization was not confined solely to the Indus or Ghaggar-Hakra valleys, the most appropriate choice is to use the term 'Harappan' civilization. This is based on the archaeological convention of naming a culture after the site where it was initially identified. It is crucial to note that using the term 'Harappan' civilization does not imply that all other sites are identical to Harappa or that the culture originated exclusively from this location. In fact, Possehl emphasizes the need to analyze the Harappan civilization as distinct sub-regions, referred to as 'Domains'.

◆ *Features of Harappan pottery*

Pottery is an important marker in the reconstruction of history. In the case of the Harappan civilization, their pottery exhibits distinct characteristics. It primarily features a red hue adorned with black painted designs and has a certain range of forms and motifs. Alongside pottery, other material traits linked to this civilization comprise terracotta cakes, a standardized brick size adhering to a 1:2:4 ratio, and various types of stone and copper artefacts.

◆ *Phases of Harappan civilization*

The Harappan culture was actually a long and complex cultural process consisting of at least three phases—the early Harappan, mature Harappan, and late Harappan. The early Harappan phase represented the formative and proto-urban stage of this culture's development. Subsequently, the mature Harappan phase emerged as the urban phase, epitomizing a full-fledged stage of civilization. Lastly, the late Harappan phase denoted the post-urban period, characterized by the decline of cities. Alternative terminology has also been used to describe these distinct phases. For instance, Jim Shaffer introduced the term 'Indus Valley tradition' for the long series of human adaptations starting from the neolithic-chalcolithic stage to the decline of the Harappan civilization. Within this larger sequence, Shaffer uses the term 'regionalization era' to denote the early Harappan phase, 'integration era' for the mature Harappan phase, and 'localization era' for the late Harappan phase. Moreover, the transitions from early Harappan to mature Harappan, as well as from mature Harappan to late Harappan, are regarded as separate and distinct phases.

2.4.2 Early Harappan Phase

The origin of the Harappan Culture can indeed be traced back to the establishment of sedentary farming communities in Baluchistan during the 7th millennium BCE. Its more



◆ *'Pre-Harappan' or 'Early Harappan'*

immediate precursor was the cultural stage previously referred to as pre-Harappan, now usually referred to as the early Harappan phase. M. R. Mughal conducted the initial comprehensive analysis of the evidence derived from pre-Harappan sites across the greater Indus Valley and northern Baluchistan. Mughal examined various aspects of the evidence, including pottery, stone tools, metal artefacts, architecture, and more, from both pre-Harappan and mature Harappan levels. He sought to elucidate the relationship between these two stages. The pre-Harappan phase exhibited significant fortified settlements, a notable level of expertise in specialized crafts such as stone working, metal craftsmanship, and bead making. Additionally, it demonstrated the use of wheeled transportation and the existence of trade networks. The range of raw materials employed by the pre-Harappans was largely comparable to that of the mature Harappan phase, with the exception of jade, which was absent in the early Harappan context. The two primary elements that distinguished the pre-Harappan phase were the absence of large cities and the lack of increased level of craft specialization. Mughal argued that the so-called 'pre-Harappan' phase actually represented the early and formative stage of the Harappan culture. Consequently, he advocated for replacing the term 'pre-Harappan' with 'early Harappan'.

◆ *Period II Balakot*

Balakot, during its early Harappan Phase (Period II), exhibited wheel-made pottery with black painted designs. Some of it resembles the polychrome ware of Nal. Artefacts discovered included microliths, humped bull figurines, copper objects, terracotta pieces, shells, bones, and beads made of lapis lazuli, stone, shell, and paste. Barley, vetch, legumes, and ber remains, along with bones of various animals, were also identified.

◆ *Harappan phases at Amri*

Amri, in Sindh, dating back to 3500 BCE, had an early Harappan Phase I, divided into four sub-phases – 1A, 1B, 1C, and 1D. There was a gradual increase in the refinement and variety of pottery. Mud-brick structures emerged, and artefacts included chert blades, stone balls, bone tools, and copper or bronze fragments. The pottery of Period I-C showed wheel-made wares with geometric painted designs in brown, black, and ochre.

The early Harappan Phase I at Kot Diji witnessed the fortification of a settlement consisted of a citadel complex

◆ *Period I Kot Diji*

and a lower residential area. Artefacts included terracotta figurines (including a bull figurine), bangles, beads, and a fragment of a bronze bangle. The pottery, featuring brownish bands of paint, was characterized by short-necked ovoid pots decorated with designs like the 'horned deity,' pipal leaves, and 'fish scales.'

◆ *Mehrgarh excavations*

The excavation at Mehrgarh uncovered artefacts indicating limited connections with the Indus Valley by the end of Period VII, including Kot Diji style vessels, triangular terracotta cake fragments, long flint blades, and perforated jar fragments. However, these links do not demonstrate significant Harappan influence. Nausharo, a nearby site, displayed a clear transition from early Harappan to transitional and mature Harappan phases.

◆ *Period I Rehman Dheri*

The early Harappan Period I at Rehman Dheri dated around 3380–3040 BCE, revealed a settlement with a planned layout, including mud and mud-brick walls. Pottery designs exhibited elements of Kot Dijian style, with graffiti on some pots. Artefacts discovered included stone blades, copper and bronze tools, terracotta figurines, and beads made of lapis lazuli and turquoise. It suggests trade connections with Afghanistan and central Asia. Plant remains comprised of wheat and barley grains, while bones were identified of cattle, sheep, and goats.

◆ *Lewan factory site*

Lewan, potentially from the early 3rd millennium BCE, served as a stone tool production site during the early Harappan phase. Excavations revealed microliths, querns, stone balls, axes, ring stones, hammer stones, and materials for bead-making. Tarakai Qila yielded evidence of crops such as wheat, barley, lentils, and field peas, along with stone sickle blades. Animal bones discovered belonged to cattle, water buffalo, sheep, and goats.

◆ *Pit dwellings to mud brick houses*

Sarai Khola(Period II) in northern Punjab, Pakistan, signifies the early Harappan phase with a transition from pit dwellings to mud-brick houses. Dominant pottery included Kot Dijian style, and stone artefacts comprised microliths, celts, and chisels. Major findings included terracotta figurines, terracotta and shell bangles, beads made of steatite paste, and lapis lazuli. Copper objects like bangles, pins, rings, and rods were also present.

Harappa in Punjab province of Pakistan indicates that the first occupation of the site (Period I) belongs to the Ravi



◆ *Ravi or Hakra
Phase of Harappa*

or Hakra phase. It displayed two mounds with massive mud-brick platforms and fortifications during the early Harappan Period II phase. Structured houses and streets suggested planned layouts. Discoveries involved mud-brick walls, hearths, and a circular kiln. Pottery resembled Kot Dijian style, while chert blades, stone celts, terracotta figurines, bangles, and beads made of lapis lazuli, carnelian, and steatite were identified. Writing, inscribed seals, and standardized weights indicated advanced features. Some artefacts from the early Harappan phase persisted into the mature Harappan phase.

◆ *Period I
Kalibangan*

Period I at Kalibangan, situated by the Ghaggar River, reflected early Harappan features. The settlement had mud-brick fortifications, mud-brick houses around courtyards, standard brick sizes, hearths, storage pits, and saddle querns. Artefacts included stone blades, terracotta cakes, shell bangles, disc beads of steatite, carnelian, faience, gold, silver, and copper objects. Pottery demonstrated diversity, resembling Kot Dijian style, with red or pink colors, black designs, and occasional white. Pottery graffiti showed similarities to the mature Harappan script. A fascinating discovery was a ploughed field surface with furrow marks from centuries ago.

◆ *Banawali
artefacts*

During the early Harappan phase at Banawali, mud-brick houses with hearths and plastered storage pits in courtyards were prevalent. Pottery resembling that from Kalibangan I and artefacts like stone blades, copper objects, gold and semi-precious stone beads, and a cubical chert blade were discovered. Nearby sites along the Ghaggar-Hakra river, such as Siswal, Balu, Rohira, and Mahorana, also displayed early Harappan levels.

◆ *Period I
Rakhigarhi*

Rakhigarhi exhibited evidence of planned settlements and mud-brick structures in Early Harappan Period I. Pottery types paralleled those found at Kalibangan I. Uninscribed seals, graffiti-decorated pottery, terracotta wheels, carts, rattles, bull figurines, chert blades, weights, bone objects, and a miller were among the artefacts. Animal bones were plentiful, indicating the significance of animal husbandry. An arrangement of stacked hopscotches was discovered in an open area.

Bhirrana, located in Haryana, offered valuable insights into the development of the Harappan civilization. Period

- ◆ *Period I and II at Bhirrana*

IA represented the Hakra wares culture, Period IB denoted the early Harappan phase, Period II indicated the early mature Harappan phase, and Period IIB reflected the mature Harappan phase. Structures made of mud bricks in a 1:2:3 ratio, including a housing complex with six rooms and a central courtyard, were found during Period IB. Various pottery types, copper objects, beads made of different materials, terracotta figurines, rattles, cakes, wheels, game pieces, and stone sling balls were among the artefacts uncovered.

2.4.3 Mature Harappan Phase

Urban Culture – Town Planning

- ◆ *Urban - rural interaction*
- ◆ *Size of the settlements*

The Harappan civilization consisted of a mix of urban and rural settlements, with the majority being villages. The cities relied on villages for food, labour, and the distribution of goods. This urban-rural interaction facilitated the spread of Harappan artefacts to even the smallest village sites. The size and function of Harappan sites varied greatly. The largest settlements included Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Ganweriwala, Rakhigarhi, and Dholavira. Lurewala in Cholistan was estimated to be as large as Mohenjo-daro. Other notable sites were Nagoor, Tharo Waro Daro, Lakhueenjo-Daro, Nondowri, Dhalewan, Gurni Kalan I, Hasanpur II, Lakhmirwala, and Baglian Da Theh. The settlements ranged from large cities to small pastoral camps, with sites like Kalibangan, Amri, Lothal, Chanhudaro, and Rojdi falling in between.

- ◆ *Urban planning of Harappan cities*

Although the streets and houses of Harappan cities were not strictly laid out on a perfect grid pattern, the settlements were clearly planned. There was no direct correlation between planning and settlement size. For instance, Lothal exhibited a higher level of planning compared to the larger Kalibangan. Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Kalibangan, Lothal, Surkotada, and Dholavira had similar layouts, with citadel complexes and lower cities, while Dholavira had an additional middle town.

- ◆ *Buildings in cities and towns*

In terms of construction materials, village houses mainly used mud-bricks with occasional use of stone. Buildings in towns and cities were made of sun-dried and burnt bricks. In the rocky areas of Kutch and Saurashtra, there was extensive use of stone. Dholavira stood out with its massive fortification walls and stone pillars in the citadel, which is a distinct feature not found in other Harappan sites.

A striking feature of Harappan structures is the uniformity



- ◆ *Size of bricks used in Harappan structures*

in the average size of the bricks used for houses and city walls, maintaining a consistent ratio of thickness, width, and length (1:2:4). This pattern emerged during the early Harappan phase and became prevalent in all settlements during the mature Harappan phase.

Bathing areas and toilets were separate in most houses or groups of houses. Bathing platforms with drains were commonly situated in rooms adjacent to wells. Drains connected these areas to larger sewage systems in the streets. Toilets varied from simple holes to more complex arrangements. Recent excavations revealed toilets in almost every house at Harappa. Waste disposal involved pots with small holes, allowing water seepage into the ground, and some waste was directed through channels to street drains.
- ◆ *Bathing area, toilets and sewage system*

Harappan settlements showcased well-planned streets, lanes, and drainage systems. Even smaller towns had impressive setups, with separate sewage chutes, rainwater collection systems, and interconnected drains. At Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, terracotta pipes directed wastewater into open street drains. These connected to large drains along main streets that emptied outside the city walls. Soak pits collected solid waste at regular intervals. These must have been cleaned out regularly. Otherwise, the drainage system would have become choked and caused a health hazard.
- ◆ *Well-planned drainage system*

The Harappans made elaborate arrangements for water for drinking and bathing, with sources including rivers, wells, and reservoirs. Mohenjo-daro featured numerous wells, while Harappa had fewer wells and a central depression that likely served as a reservoir. Dholavira's stone-lined water reservoirs were notable. The Harappans emphasized personal hygiene, evident from bathing facilities at various sites, which may have held religious or ritual significance.
- ◆ *Water management system*

2.4.4 Mature Harappan Sites

Mohenjodaro

- ◆ *The Great Bath, Great Granary and College of priests*

Mohenjodaro, situated near the Indus River in Sindh, consists of two mounds: a smaller western mound and a larger eastern mound. The lower city, estimated to have housed around 41,250 people, may not have been fortified but rather represented a symbolic landscape. On the citadel mound, notable structures include the Great Bath, a possible

granary, and a college of priests. Adjacent to the Great Bath, a large building with small rooms is tentatively identified as the college of priests. Another structure, initially believed to be a hot-air bath or 'great granary', stands on a raised platform. Its purpose remains uncertain. An assembly hall is also present on the citadel mound.

◆ *Features of lower town*

The lower town, covering over 80 hectares, likely had a fortification wall. Varied house sizes imply socioeconomic differences. A building, possibly a temple or the residence of an important figure, and rooms potentially serving as shops or workers' quarters are found in the lower town. Numerous shops and workshops engaged in various crafts, such as copper working and pottery making, were identified. There were over 700 wells in the city of Mohenjo-daro, with private wells in most houses and public wells along the main street in many areas.

◆ *Craft activity and evidence of bead factory*

Chanhudaro

Chanhudaro, situated 130 km south of Mohenjo-daro, is an unfortified mound site associated with craft activities. Excavations have uncovered mud-brick platforms and traces of streets. Houses yielded raw materials like carnelian, agate, and crystal, along with finished and unfinished beads. It suggests the presence of a bead factory. Shell working, seal making, and stone weight production were also practiced.

◆ *Citadel, Workmen's quarters and granary*

Harappa

Harappa, near the Ravi River, features a higher citadel mound and a larger lower town. The damaged nature of the mound hinders a clear understanding of its structures. A northern suburb with a mud-brick wall reveals workmen's quarters and circular brick platforms, for grain threshing. The "granary" has 12 units, but no grains were found. The lower town of Harappa, under ongoing excavation, shows a possible marketplace near the southern gateway. Workshops producing shell, agate, and copper artefacts have been identified. Outside the gateway, a small mound uncovers houses, drains, bathing platforms, and a possible resting spot for travellers or traders.

Kalibangan

Kalibangan, a small site in Rajasthan, is known for its black bangles scattered on the mounds. It consists of two mounds, KLB-1 and KLB-2, separated by an open space.



- ◆ *Evidence of fire altars and burial grounds*

KLB-1 shows early and mature Harappan occupation, while KLB-2 represents mature Harappan culture. Both the citadel complex and lower town are fortified. The western mound of Kalibangan has an inner wall dividing the settlement. The southern sector had no houses but has sacrificial pits interpreted as fire altars. The northern part likely accommodated individuals associated with the rituals. A burial ground is also found west-southwest of the citadel. Apart from regularly extended burials, there were also some circular pits with grave goods, but no human remains.

- ◆ *Kalibangan lower town*

The lower town has a parallelogram layout enclosed by a mud-brick wall. Houses contain fire altars, and drains are present on the citadel mound. Bangles made of various materials indicate bangle-making as a significant craft. Notable artefacts include an ivory comb, copper buffalo, stone phallic emblem, and a terracotta fragment.

Banawali

- ◆ *Evidence of early, mature and late Harappan phase*

Banawali, in Haryana, is a fortified site with early, mature, and late Harappan phases. It has a higher citadel area and lower town, separated by a wall. Baked bricks are used for wells, pavements, and drains. Houses feature raised platforms, and a multi-roomed house shows a kitchen and a toilet with a washbasin-like jar. Seals are found in the lower town, along with stone weights and a terracotta plough model. Fire altars are associated with a ritualistic structure.

Rakhigarhi

- ◆ *Lapidary workshop and Cemetery*

Rakhigarhi, located in Haryana, consists of five mounds. The citadel mound features a mud-brick fortification wall with platforms, a brick wall, fire altars, streets, and drains. A lapidary workshop was discovered, with unfinished beads and stone pieces, including carnelian, chalcedony, agate, and jasper. Bone and ivory working evidence was found, such as bones, antlers, ivory pieces, and finished and unfinished tools. The cemetery revealed eight burials, including one with a wooden coffin.

Bhirrana

- ◆ *Period IIA and Period IIB of Bhirrana*

Bhirrana, also in Haryana, has early mature Harappan (Period IIA) and mature Harappan (Period IIB) phases. The settlement had a massive mud-brick fortification wall. Multiple house complexes were uncovered, including one with four rooms, two separated by a lane, and another with

six rooms, a kitchen, courtyards, and a verandah. Artefacts included a thick red ware fragment with an incised female figure reminiscent of the bronze Mohenjodaro 'dancing girl.'

Lothal

◆ Dockyard

Lothal in Gujarat, located between the Sabarmati River and its tributary, the Bhogavo, had a rectangular settlement enclosed by mud and burnt brick walls. The citadel, known as the 'Acropolis,' featured residential buildings, streets, bathing pavements, and drains. A warehouse-like complex existed south of the residential area. Houses varied in size and had fire altars, while a street was identified as a bazaar street. The most notable feature of Lothal is the dockyard, which had a trapezoidal basin with burnt brick walls, a sluice gate, a spill channel, and a mud-brick wharf for loading and unloading goods.

Dholavira

◆ Architecture of Dholavira

Dholavira, situated on Kadir Island in Rann of Kutch in Gujarat, showcases unique architectural features and an impressive water management system. The site's layout deviates from other Harappan sites, with an outer fortification wall adorned with stone blocks, bastions, and central gateways. The settlement comprises a castle area, a bailey area, a middle town, and a lower town, each enclosed by its own walls. An interesting feature is a large open stadium area, which suggests ceremonial use. The location of Dholavira is on maritime trade routes, which held significant importance.

◆ Evidence of inscription

The fortified citadel had central gateways on all sides. The northern gateway had a fallen signboard with an inscription inlaid with gypsum paste on a wooden board. It possibly denotes the name of the city or title of the ruler. The citadel contains a well, an intricate drainage system, and buildings possibly used for administrative or ritual purposes.

◆ Water harvesting and management system

The middle town has four gateways, while the lower town has residential structures and areas for crafts such as bead making and pottery. Outside the city walls, additional habitation and rectangular pit burials with stone block linings are found. The exceptional water harvesting system of Dholavira includes dams across the Manhar and Mandsar streams, directing water to reservoirs. Several large cisterns and reservoirs, approximately 16 in total, stored rainwater within the citadel and lower town.



Allahdino

- ◆ Houses and buildings
- ◆ Discovery of terracotta jars and ornaments

Allahdino is a small unfortified Harappan village site near Karachi. Mud-brick houses, resting on stone foundations, were arranged in a west-southwest to east-northeast orientation. A significant structure on a mud-brick platform and another associated with three small-diameter wells suggest their roles related to irrigation. Excavations yielded diverse artefacts from Allahdino: copper items, seals, terracotta toys, and triangular cakes. A noteworthy find was a small terracotta jar filled with gold, silver, bronze, agate, and carnelian ornaments. These included a belt or necklace with 36 carnelian and bronze beads, and a multistrand silver necklace. The presence of such valuable ornaments reveals the wealth of some Harappan villagers.

2.4.5 Harappan Society, Religion and Polity

- ◆ Social differentiation

The absence of deciphered written evidence poses a challenge in understanding Harappan society. Hence, inferences have to be made very carefully on the basis of archaeological data. The society comprised diverse occupational groups, including farmers, herders, hunters, craftspeople, fisherfolk, merchants, rulers, and so on. While social differentiation may have been less pronounced than in other civilizations, variations in house sizes and jewellery indicate wealth disparities. The privileged groups of society would have consisted of rulers, landowners, and traders. Distinctions in social class and status, influenced by one's occupation, wealth, and standing, likely existed.

- ◆ Fertility goddesses
- ◆ Pasupati seal
- ◆ Animal and Human sacrifices

Religious practices in the Harappan civilization centered around the worship of female fertility goddesses, supported by cross-cultural parallels and terracotta figurines labeled as "Mother Goddesses." The worship of a male deity, represented by the Pashupati seal, suggests reverence for a god associated with animals. Stone icons of lingas and yonis symbolized male and female creative energy, serving various purposes debated by scholars. Ritualistic activities were observed at the Great Bath and through artefacts depicting possible animal and human sacrifices.

The longevity of Harappan civilization, around 700 years and the continuity of its artefacts, traditions, and symbols imply political stability. It is probable that there were groups of rulers in different cities, but their identities and relationships to each other remain unknown. These groups

◆ *Political stability*

would have had the responsibility of upkeeping the city facilities, including walls, roads, drains, and public structures. Some of the seals discovered may contain names, titles, and symbols associated with these influential individuals, which could provide valuable insights into the rulers of the Harappan civilization if the script could be deciphered.

◆ *Piggott's Hypothesis*

One of the earliest hypotheses regarding the Harappan political structure was put forward by Stuart Piggott and was supported to some extent by Mortimer Wheeler. They suggested that the Harappan state was a centralized empire ruled by priest-kings from Mohenjodaro and Harappa. This view was based on uniform material traits, a common script, and standardized measures. Mohenjodaro and Harappa stood out with urban planning and public works, indicating centralized control. The absence of inter-settlement warfare suggested unity.

◆ *Fairservis's criticism*

However, Walter A. Fairservis challenged this perspective, arguing against the existence of an empire or state. He proposed an elaborate village administration as an alternative explanation. Fairservis later acknowledged some centralized control and a class structure but emphasized interdependence, religion, and tradition in social regulation. Fairservis criticized the idea of a centralized empire, as artefacts were found across different settlements, suggesting equal access to wealth. Yet, evidence points to the existence of a state, indicated by communication systems, standardized artefacts, labour mobilization, trading outposts, cultural homogeneity, and a common script. Social differentiation and administrative structures in the Citadel complex further imply centralized control.

2.4.6 Harappan Crafts

Pottery and Ceramics

Harappan ceramics include a variety of clay items, including bricks, terracotta, and faience. Pottery production in Harappan civilization reveals efficient mass production techniques. Pottery kilns have been discovered in Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Nausharo, and Chanhudaro, where pots were fired in closed kilns with up-draft systems. Harappan pottery displays diversity, with black-on-red, grey, buff, and black-and-red wares. Most pots were wheel-turned, exhibiting fine craftsmanship. The typical Harappan



◆ *Distinctive shapes and decorative patterns*

pottery features sturdy, wheel-made ware with a bright red slip adorned with painted black designs. Polychrome painting is rare. Distinctive shapes include dish-on-stand, S-profile vases, vessels with knobbed decoration, slender-footed bowls, perforated jars, and goblets with pointed feet. Decorative patterns range from simple lines to geometric motifs. Human figures are rare and crude. Early Mohenjodaro layers shows burnished grey ware with a purplish slip and vitreous glaze, may represent one of the earliest examples of glazing in the world.

◆ *Functions of the Harappan pots*

The function of Harappan pottery can be inferred. Large jars likely stored grain or water. Elaborate pots may have had ceremonial or wealthy owners. Small vessels served as drinking glasses. The purpose of perforated jars remains uncertain, possibly for brewing alcoholic beverages or rituals. Shallow bowls likely held cooked food, while flat dishes served as plates. Cooking pots of various sizes featured red or black-slipped rims, rounded bottoms, and reinforced lower parts. These rims projected outwards for easy handling. Some Harappan pottery forms and features can be seen in traditional kitchens even today. Metal utensils were also crafted and used alongside ceramic vessels by the Harappans.

◆ *Terracotta artefacts*

Terracotta

Harappan civilization reveals a wealth of terracotta artefacts, including animal figurines, toy carts, and various types of female and male figurines. Terracotta bangles and masks also demonstrate their craftsmanship. Additionally, the Harappans mastered faience, creating bangles, rings, pendants, miniature vessels, and figurines. Another distinctive Harappan craft was the stoneware bangles, characterized by their hard, burnished surfaces.

Stone, Copper and Bronze works

◆ *Stone tools*

◆ *Copper workshop at Lothal and Harappa*

Stonework was another important craft. Reference was made earlier to the stone masonry and finely polished pillars at Dholavira. Stone tools, particularly chert blades, were mass-produced using a specialized technique. Copper objects were abundant, ranging from vessels and weapons to tools and personal adornments. Copper alloys, including arsenic, tin, or nickel, were used in their production. Bronze tools gradually increased in prevalence over time. Copper furnaces and workshops highlight the significance of

metallurgy in Harappan society. Sixteen copper furnaces were found at Harappa, and copper workshops were found at Lothal. A large amount of copper oxide was discovered in a brick-lined pit at Mohenjodaro. Metal objects were deemed precious and often buried in hoards for safekeeping. Excavations have uncovered such hoards containing a variety of copper tools and weapons.

Jewellery

The Harappan civilization is renowned for its exquisite gold and silver jewellery, including necklaces, bracelets, brooches, pendants, and earrings. A valuable hoard of jewellery, adorned with semi-precious stones, was discovered at the village site of Allahdino. Silver was used to emboss conch shells and craft vessels, while lead was used in the production of plumb bobs and copper casting. **Seal Making**

- ◆ *Use of gold, silver and iron*

Seal making was a significant craft in Harappan society, with most seals being square or rectangular in shape. Steatite was the primary material used, although silver, faience, and calcite seals were also found. Stone seals were meticulously carved using knives, chisels, and drills, then coated with alkali and heated to achieve a lustrous white surface. The carvings were done in intaglio, with motifs depicting various animals such as elephants, tigers, and unicorns, along with composite creatures, human figures, and plants. Inscriptions were present on most seals, though rectangular seals were written without any motif.

- ◆ *Size, type and use of seals*
- ◆ *Inscription on seals*

Bead Making

Bead making in the Harappan civilization required new materials, styles, and techniques. Cylindrical stone drills were used to perforate beads made from semi-precious stones such as steatite, agate, carnelian, lapis lazuli, shell, gold, silver, and copper. The long barrel cylinder beads made of carnelian were highly prized, even reaching royal burials in Mesopotamia. Bead-making factories with tools, furnaces, and beads in various stages of preparation were found at sites like Chanhudaro and Lothal. The storage of semi-precious stones in clay-lined silos has been identified. The bead-making tradition in Gujarat provides insights into the techniques used by Harappan craftspeople.

- ◆ *Bead-making factories at Chanhudaro and Lothal*

Shell Working

The presence of beadwork, bracelets, and decorative inlay work with shell materials indicates the skilled craftsmanship



◆ *Bangles from Conch shell*

◆ *Bone working and Ivory carving*

of shell workers in the Harappan civilization. Bangles, often crafted from conch shells, were a prominent product. Chanhudaro and Balakot emerged as significant centers for shell working, while Nageshwar in Gujarat specialized exclusively in shell-working and bangle production. Other sites such as Kuntasi, Dholavira, Rangpur, Lothal, Nagwada, and Bagasra also yielded evidence of shell working, emphasizing the importance of this craft in the Gujarat region. Bone working was another specialized craft, producing beads, awls, and pins. Ivory carving was a limited practice, with examples including combs, carved cylinders, small sticks, pins, gamesmen, and a carved plaque.

Weaving and Textiles

◆ *Traces of cotton and woollen clothes*

It can be inferred from the available evidence that the Harappans made cotton and woollen textiles. Terracotta figurines wearing clothes, as well as references in Mesopotamian texts, indicate the use of cotton, which was imported from the region known as Meluhha, encompassing the Indus Valley. Traces of cotton cloth were discovered at Mohenjodaro, preserved over time due to contact with a corroded silver jar. Cotton threads and cloth were also identified on copper tools. Excavations at Harappa revealed woven textile impressions on the inner surfaces of faience vessels, displaying a consistent thickness and weave uniformity suggestive of spinning wheels. Spindle whorls used for spinning thread were found at various Harappan sites. Weaving likely took place in both villages and cities. Impressions on clay floors and fired clay lumps suggest traditions of making baskets and mats out of reeds and grasses.

2.4.7 Harappan Trade

◆ *Raw materials*

The identification of the major sources of raw materials used by the Harappans is a crucial aspect of understanding Harappan trade. This can be achieved through scientific analysis of artefacts and comparing the results with raw materials from various potential sources. Another method involves mapping the locations of known resources of different raw materials, particularly those in close proximity to the Harappan culture zone. The confirmation of their use during protohistoric times would provide conclusive evidence.

2.4.7.1 Internal Trade

- ◆ *Metals, grains and food products*

The Harappan civilization engaged in extensive trade networks, acquiring raw materials and exchanging goods with various regions. Chert blades were mass-produced in Sukkur and Rohri and distributed to Harappan settlements in Sindh. Rajasthan served as a significant source of copper, lead, and zinc, while tin likely came from Tosam in present-day Haryana or other sources in Afghanistan and central Asia. Gold was obtained from the Kolar fields in Karnataka through trade with local Neolithic communities. The Gujarat region supplied semiprecious stones for bead production, except for lapis lazuli, which likely came from Afghanistan or the Chagai hills in Baluchistan. Traders facilitated the exchange of grains and other food products between villages and cities.

2.4.7.2 Westerly Trade

- ◆ *Persian Gulf*

Harappan trade extended to the western regions, as evidenced by discoveries in sites like Altyn Depe, Namazga, and Khapuz in south Turkmenistan. Objects featuring Harappan motifs and writing were found in Failaka, an island in the Persian Gulf. Increased trade connections with the Persian Gulf were substantiated by artefacts discovered in Bahrain. It includes ivory pieces, linga-shaped objects, mirrors, and seals with Harappan motifs and writing.

- ◆ *Trade with Oman*

- ◆ *Overland trade routes*

Trade contacts with Oman are evident through the discovery of a Harappan-style etched carnelian bead in Umm-an-Nar. Similar objects found at the site, such as seals, pottery fragments, and stone weights, indicate trade links with Harappan artefacts. Imports from Oman possibly included chlorite vessels, shells, and mother-of-pearl, while the Harappans exported beads, chert weights, and ivory objects. The importance of overland routes from the Harappan civilization through Afghanistan is evident from the location of Harappan sites near each of the passes and routes that lead through Baluchistan into Afghanistan.

- ◆ *Lapis lazuli from Afghanistan*

- ◆ *Jade from Turkmenistan*

Long-distance imports to the Harappan civilization included lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, jade from Turkmenistan, and carved chlorite and green schist vessels from southern Iran or Baluchistan. Harappan contexts have yielded few artefacts from West Asia, but a Persian Gulf-style seal was found in Lothal. Evidence suggests the use of overland trade routes through Afghanistan, with key sites located near important passes and routes.



◆ *Overland and maritime trade route*

Two primary overland routes connected the Harappan civilization with West Asia: a northern route through Afghanistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Mesopotamia, and a southern route via Tepe Yahya, Jalalabad, Susa, and Ur. Maritime trade routes also played a significant role, with sites like Sutkagen-dor, Balakot, and Dabarkot serving as important points along the coast. Coastal sites in Kutch, as well as Lothal, Kuntasi, and Dholavira, were involved in maritime trade.

◆ *Mesopotamian records*

Literary records from Mesopotamia mention trade between the Harappans and the lands of Dilmun, Magan, and Meluhha. Archaeological evidence includes Harappan seals and carnelian beads found at Mesopotamian sites, indicating trade interactions. The absence of Mesopotamian seals in Harappan contexts suggests indirect involvement of Mesopotamian traders in the trade network.

2.4.8 Indus Script

◆ *Undeciphered Harappan script*

The language and writing system of the Harappan civilization remain a profound mystery. It is believed that different languages and dialects were spoken within the Harappan culture zone, with the ruling elite using a particular language reflected in the inscriptions on seals. The Harappan script, found on about 3,700 objects, primarily seals and sealings, remains undeciphered. Most of the inscriptions, with an average of five signs, have been discovered at Mohenjodaro and Harappa, which together account for 87% of all inscribed material. The script seems to have emerged in a fully developed form and shows little variation over time, though this may be due to incomplete excavation records. The script consists of approximately 400-450 basic signs and follows a logo-syllabic structure, where each symbol represents a word or syllable. It is generally written and read from right to left, except on seals where the direction is reversed. Some inscriptions are written in the boustrophedon style, with consecutive lines starting in opposite directions. Writing also appears on miniature tablets made of various materials, including steatite and terracotta. These tablets do not feature reversed writing like the seals.

The Dholavira “signboard” indicates a civic use of writing, though the surviving written material is limited, and it is likely that writing was also done on perishable materials. The widespread use of a common script across the vast Harappan

- ◆ Virtual disappearance of the script

culture zone suggests a high level of cultural integration. The disappearance of the script by approximately 1700 BCE indicates its association with urban life and its dominance among the elite class. Despite extensive research, the Harappan script remains undeciphered, posing a significant challenge to understanding the language and society of the civilization .

2.4.9 Decline of the Indus Cities

- ◆ Pace of decline

The decline of the Harappan civilization occurred at different times and at varying paces across different sites. Mohenjodaro experienced a gradual decline, ending around 2000 BCE, while other sites continued until approximately 1800 BCE. One of the most popular explanations of the decline of the Harappan civilization is the Aryan invasion. The Aryan Invasion Theory suggests that the civilization was destroyed by Aryan invaders, but this explanation lacks strong evidence.

Aryan Invasion Theory

- ◆ Skeletal remains at Mohenjo daro and Aryan massacre

The idea that the Harappan civilization was destroyed by Aryan invaders was first put forward by Ramaprasad Chanda and was elaborated on by Mortimer Wheeler. Mortimer Wheeler proposed the Aryan Invasion Theory based on references in the *Rig Veda* to forts, attacks on cities, and the epithet *purandara* given to the God Indra. He identified Hariyupiya in the *Rig Veda* as Harappa and pointed to skeletal remains at Mohenjodaro as proof of an Aryan massacre. He subsequently modified his hypothesis to the extent that he acknowledged that other factors such as floods, the decline in trade, and over-utilization of natural resources may have had a role to play. But he insisted that the ultimate blow was given by an Aryan invasion. The Cemetery-H culture, he suggested, represented the culture of the Aryan invaders. However, other scholars have refuted this theory.

- ◆ Kennedy's analysis on skeletal remains

Critics such as P. V. Kane, George Dales, and B. B. Lal argue that the evidence from the *Rig Veda* is inconclusive. There is no archaeological evidence of military assault or conflict at Harappan sites. The skeletal remains at Mohenjodaro belong to different cultural phases and do not indicate a single event. The absence of major battles on the citadel mound and a sterile layer between the Harappan and Cemetery-H levels contradict Wheeler's hypothesis. Furthermore, analysis by K. A. R. Kennedy shows no significant physical discontinuity in



the skeletal record, indicating no major influx of new settlers with different physiognomy. Therefore, the idea of an Indo-Aryan invasion as the cause of the decline of Harappan civilization is not supported.

Natural Disasters

Mohenjodaro likely experienced deterioration due to recurrent natural floods, while Harappan sites in the Ghaggar-Hakra valley were impacted by gradual desiccation. The alteration of river courses, such as the capture of the Sutlej by the Indus or the Yamuna merging with the Ganga system, significantly reduced water flow into the Ghaggar. Consequently, settlements in the region witnessed a substantial decline as the river dried up. Additionally, a sudden elevation of the Arabian Sea coastline in western Pakistan might have triggered floods and increased soil salinity, potentially disrupting coastal communications and trade.

- ◆ Continuous flood at Mohenjodaro
- ◆ Disruption of coastal communications and trade

Environmental Change

The issue of environmental change is intertwined with the relationship of Harappans 'with their surroundings. Their practices, including excessive cultivation, overgrazing, and deforestation for fuel and agriculture, likely led to decreasing soil fertility, floods, and increasing soil salinity. Fairservis speculates that the decline of the civilization can be attributed to the inability to sustain the growing population of humans and cattle within the Harappan cultural zone, based on estimates of population, land, food, and fodder requirements using modern data.

- ◆ Over exploitation of resources
- ◆ Growth of population

Although archaeological evidence does not directly reveal the social and political dimensions underlying the decline of the Harappan civilization, it clearly indicates a gradual process of de-urbanization. Following the mature Harappan phase, the culture transitioned into a post-urban phase known as the late Harappan phase.

- ◆ De-urbanization

2.4.10 The Post-Urban Phase: Late Harappan Cultures

The Late Harappan phase is characterized by five distinct geographical zones: Sindh, west Punjab and the Ghaggar-Hakra valley, eastern Punjab and Haryana, the Ganga-Yamuna doab, and Kutch and Saurashtra. In Sindh, the Jhukar culture represents the Late Harappan phase, evident

- ◆ *Five geographical zones of the late Harappan phase*
- ◆ *Jhukar culture in Sindh*

at sites like Jhukar, Chanhudaro, and Amri. The transition from the mature to the late Harappan phase in this region does not exhibit abrupt discontinuity. Instead, there are gradual changes observed in the seals, a decrease in the frequency of cubical weights, and the confinement of writing to pottery. Pottery evidence suggests reciprocal contacts between the Jhukar culture of Sindh and the late Harappan culture at Lothal and Rangpur.

- ◆ *Cemetery-H culture*
- ◆ *Size and number of settlements*

In the Punjab province of Pakistan and the Ghaggar-Hakra valley, the late Harappan phase is represented by the Cemetery-H culture. The number of settlements declines from 174 during the mature Harappan phase to 50 in the late Harappan phase. In east Punjab, Haryana, and north Rajasthan, the late Harappan settlements are comparatively smaller than their mature Harappan counterparts. In the Ganga-Yamuna doab, there are 130 late Harappan sites in contrast to the 31 mature Harappan sites. These settlements are small in size, and houses are predominantly made of wattle and daub, but the agricultural practices display significant diversity. In Kutch and Saurashtra, there is a notable increase in the number of settlements during the early late Harappan phase, rising from 18 in the mature Harappan phase to 120.

- ◆ *Decline of the elements of Harappan urbanism*

The evidence from mature and late Harappan sites showcases a complex interplay of continuity and change. Late Harappan pottery exhibits a less vibrant slip compared to its mature Harappan counterpart, with pots being thicker and sturdier. Certain classic Harappan pottery shapes, such as the beaker, goblet, perforated jar, s-shaped jar, and pyriform jar, disappear, while others, like jars of different shapes and the dish-on-stand, persist. Elements of Harappan urbanism, including cities, script, seals, specialized crafts, and long-distance trade, decline during the late Harappan phase but do not vanish entirely. Urban Late Harappan sites like Kudwala, Bet Dwarka, and Daimabad are limited in number. Graffiti on pottery is observed in Saurashtra, northern Gujarat, and the eastern regions. Some potsherds with Harappan letters are found at Daimabad, while circular and rectangular seals, including a rectangular conch shell seal with a three-headed animal motif similar to those found in the Persian Gulf, are discovered at various late Harappan sites. Bhagwanpura exhibits flourishing specialized craft activity, featuring clay tablets, pottery sherds with graffiti that might represent a script, and the presence of faience ornaments, semi-precious stone beads, terracotta cart frames, kilns, and fire altars in



Punjab and Haryana.

◆ *Beginning of double cropping*

The Late Harappan phase witnessed the diversification of agriculture. There was the beginning of double cropping – wheat and barley were being grown as winter crops and rice (with irrigation), millet, and sorghum as summer crops. Pirak in Baluchistan developed the system of double cropping in agriculture. There were fairly large settlements, growing a variety of crops, supplemented with irrigation in the Kachi region. Various kinds of millets were being grown as summer crops in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Rice and millet were cultivated at late Harappan levels at Harappa. Rice, barley, dwarf wheat, bread wheat, club wheat, oats, jowar, and finger millet were also cultivated. Pulses were cultivated by them along with grains. It included lentils, field peas, grass pea kulthi, green grams and chickpeas.

◆ *Decline of urban features and the diversification of agriculture*

The Harappan Civilization was considered as the first urban culture in South Asia. It emerged from the proto-urban early Harappan phase. Archaeological sources give a clear picture about its varied subsistence base, vibrant craft traditions, and vast trade networks. Due to the non decipherment of the script, conclusions about many other aspects, such as religion, society, and polity remain speculative. The Harappan Civilization is distinct from other civilizations of the world in its cultural homogeneity as well as diversity. It is noticed that some of the neolithic, neolithic-chalcolithic, and chalcolithic were roughly contemporaneous with the Harappan civilization. The Harappan civilization did not come to a sudden end but the urban phase was followed by the late Harappan phase. The late Harappan Phase witnessed the decline of its urban features and the diversification of agriculture.

Summarised Overview

The Indus Valley Civilization, also referred to as the Harappan Civilization, was one of the earliest urban civilizations in history. It flourished in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent from around 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE. The Indus River Valley and its surrounding areas were the main settlements of the Indus Valley Civilization, which was situated in what is now Pakistan and India. This culture is known for its well-developed urban planning, innovative agricultural methods, and extensive trade networks.

The Indus Valley Civilization is considered to have had a complex trading system, with various cities specialising in the production of various goods, according to archaeological evidence. Mohenjo-Daro, for instance, was well-known for its pottery, whereas Harappa was well-known for its textiles. Cities were able to exchange their surplus goods with other cities in the area owing to this specialisation, which made the trade network more effective. The Harappan people engaged in trade with neighbouring civilizations as well as civilizations that were farther away, like Mesopotamia and Egypt. With access to both the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Indus Valley Civilization enjoyed a strategic location that made their trade with other civilizations convenient.

Textiles, pottery, jewellery, and metals were among the many goods traded by the Indus Valley Civilization. Additionally, they exchanged rice, barley, and other agricultural goods. Cotton textiles were an important commodity that was traded with other civilizations as the civilization was well known for its cotton production. A sophisticated system of weights and measures facilitated the Harappan trade. According to archaeological findings, Harappans used standardised weights made of stone, bronze, and copper to measure commodities like grains, metals, and textiles. Moreover, the Indus Valley Civilization interacted with other cultures through the exchange of goods as well as ideas and technologies.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Harappan civilization is its script, also known as the Harappan script. It is not much is known about the written language of this civilization because this script is still indecipherable. Seals and inscriptions, however, offer insight into the script's intricate symbols and show that the civilization had a sophisticated system of record-keeping.

Regarding the Harappan polity, some scholars argue that Harappans had a centralized empire. While others contended it by showing archaeological evidence. The evidence of the Pasupati seal and terracotta female figurines of fertility goddesses suggest the belief system of Harappans. They are well known for their skills in craft works, including those of pottery, jewellery and metal works.

The Harappan culture is divided into three phases- Early Harappan, Mature Harappan and Late Harappan. The late Harappan phase is represented by several cultures, such as the Jhukar culture in Sindh and Cemetery-H culture in Punjab province. This phase was marked by the decline of urban features and the diversification of agriculture. Historians and archaeologists continue to differ about the decline of the Harappan civilization. According to some theories, the decline of civilization may have been influenced by climate change-related events or natural disasters such as drought or flooding. Others claim that an Aryan invasion or political unrest may have contributed.



Self Assessment

1. What were the features of the Early Harappan civilization?
2. Name any three important centres of Harappan civilization and list out their features.
3. Write a brief note on the trade networks of Harappans, including internal and external trade relationships.
4. Mention the name of five sites that belong to the Mature Harappan Phase.
5. Provide an account of the Harappan town planning.
6. Write a short note on the Harappan script.
7. What do you know about Harappan craft production?
8. Mention any three factors that are considered to have caused the decline of the Indus Valley civilization.
9. Give an account of the late Harappan cultures.

Assignments

1. Harappan civilization is considered to be an urban culture. Examine its urban features with respect to its town planning.
2. Explore the trade networks of the Harappan civilization and compare them with those of its contemporary civilizations, such as Mesopotamia and Egypt.
3. One of the most distinctive features of the Harappan civilization was its system of writing. Discuss the Indus script and its decipherment.
4. Elaborate on the religious belief and practices of Harappans, including the role of its deities, rituals, and symbols.
5. Discuss various factors that led to the decline of the Indus Valley civilization by analysing different theories and hypotheses associated with it.

Suggested Readings

1. Agrawal, D.P. and D.K. Chakrabarti (eds.), *Essays in Indian Proto-History*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1979.

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1. Chakrabarti, D. K., *The Harappan Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
2. Kosambi, D. D., *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in its Historical Outline*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1987.
3. Lal, B.B. and S.P. Gupta (eds.), *Frontiers of the Indus Civilization*, Books and Books, New Delhi, 1982.
4. Ratnagar, S., *Understanding Harappa: Civilization in the Greater Indus Valley*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2006.
5. Singh, Upinder, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*, Pearson Education India, 2008.



Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

Vedic Age and Cultural Transition

BLOCK-03





Aryans, Vedas and PGW Culture

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ♦ understand the fundamental questions of the Aryan Debate
- ♦ discern the difference between Harappan and Vedic Culture
- ♦ historically locate the major changes that happened between Vedic and later Vedic periods
- ♦ discern the cultural exchanges between Painted Grey Ware(PGW) culture and post-Harappan culture

Background

After the decline of the Indus Valley civilization in 1900 BCE, there emerged diverse communities who were nomadic hunter- gatherers using microliths. Some communities were semi-sedentary, sedentary and agro-pastoralists who were associated with Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Iron Ages and Vedic cultures. The Early Vedic culture is associated with certain Chalcolithic cultures found in India and the Later Vedic culture is linked to the PGW culture that prevailed during the Iron Age in North India.

The Vedic culture was considered the foundation of Indian civilization prior to the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization. Many of the contemporary social aspects can be traced back to the socio-philosophical world reflected in Vedic literature, e.g. the question of caste. The root of the caste system lies in the division of society based on *Varna*, which had been a contribution of the Vedic society. It was Orientalists and Indologists who initiated the analytical study of the Vedic literature. The modern imagination of the Vedic literature is substantially owed to colonial academic interests, mainly supported by the interpretation of the *Brahmins*. Later, attempts were made to re-interpret the Vedic culture. Whatever it may be, these literary expressions provide valuable sources for the historians of ancient India. The historical understanding of the Vedic culture is inevitable to understand and resolve the contemporary political discourses forged around the identity question.



The historical understanding of the early Vedic period is connected with the concept of Indo- Aryan migration. These Indo - Aryans were recognised as a linguistic group speaking Indo- European languages. The Aryan Invasion Theory proposes that the Aryans were nomadic people who migrated from Central Asia to the subcontinent around 1500 BCE. This event is considered to have made a significant cultural transition in the Vedic period. This theory still remains a matter of debate and controversy. In this unit, let us have an analysis of the 'Aryan debate' and the transition that happened in the Vedic period.

Keywords

Aryans, Vedic culture, Vedic literature, Pastoral society, *Varna* system, Painted Grey Ware, Pottery, Post- Harappan culture

Discussion

3.1.1 The Aryan Invasion Theory

You might have come across the term *Arya* when you studied the Second World War. Hitler proposed a supremacist theory in which the Aryans received central attention. It finds due share in contemporary political discussions. These popular and academic debates have some fundamental questions at their disposal. Who were the Aryans? Where did they come from? How did they come? What are the historical contributions of the Aryans? Revolving around these questions, historians are arguing for various answers. The debate, sometimes, gets a political overtone. The term *Arya* is claimed to be an integral part of identity for a section of Indian people. Therefore, the historian is not only dealing with a social entity in the past but also indulging in the claims of a lineage survey of the historiographical notions of the term and the likely arguments made by different historians to enrich the debate. The contentious position of historians on the history of Aryans is often categorized as the Aryan debate in Indian history.

♦ *Academic and political debates on the identity of 'Aryans'*

The word *Arya* is derived from the Vedas. The writers of Vedas called themselves Aryans demarcate themselves from the rest of the population. The Orientalists - Indologists reading of the Vedas in the 19th century firmly established



- ◆ *The Orientalists-Indologists reading of the Vedas in the 19th century*

- ◆ *The racialization of the term 'Arya'*

the Aryans as the makers of Vedic civilizations. During this period European society was dominated by the idea of race. The distinct populations were portrayed as distinct races. Gradually, the term *Arya* received a racial tinge and began to be employed as a distinct race. The racialization of the term had a severe historical impact, as we see in the Second World War. Also the Aryan race theory got standardized by the popular and academic literature of the period.

- ◆ *Arya as a linguistic group*

However, some historians defied the racial explanation of *Arya*. For them, *Arya* is a linguistic group, a group of people who use the Indo-European language. It is not based on physical distinction but on the use of language by which the makers of Vedas distinguished themselves from the indigenous population. For instance, Malayali is a linguistic group that indicates those who use Malayalam as their mother tongue. Nor does it mean that Malayalees are a single ethnic or cultural cohort. Likewise, the word *Arya* denotes the use of the Indo-European language. The question on the identity of Arya, thus, got two answers; race vis-i-vis language group.

- ◆ *The Aryan migration-invasion theory: Aryans as outsiders*

Where did the Aryans come from, and how? The crux of Aryan invasion theory lies here. For some historians, the Aryans were pastorals emanating from the central Asian region, gradually migrated to the Indus region, and moved eastwards to the Gangetic plain in the later centuries. The Aryan immigration theory suggests that horses and chariots, which were an indispensable part of Aryan pastoral life, had not been indigenous in the Pre-Aryan era. Therefore, it implies that the Aryans came from outside. They might have intruded into the subcontinent batch by batch and peacefully co-existed with the local population. Intra-inter-tribal warfare existed among them. However, those tensions could not be construed as the massive eruption of violence that altered the social landscape, as happened in an organized invasion. Max Muller propounded the Aryan Invasion Theory. He argued that the Aryans were 'fair-skinned' Indo - European speaking people who migrated from Central Asia in a large scale. The invasion-migration debate is centred around the basic presumption that the Aryans come from outside.

- ◆ *The indigenous origin theory: India -The homeland of Aryans*

However, some scholars entirely rejected this postulate and argued that India is the homeland of Aryans. It was from India that the Aryans branched out to different parts of the world. Though the argument does not have empirical support, its political appeal was immense. It was used in the

national movement and carried over to political rhetoric in the later decades. The Indigenous origin theorists shifted the point of attention. The Aryan invasion theory, or the Aryan debate, tries to settle the fundamental questions on the historical identity of the Aryans.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak proposed the theory that the original homeland of the Aryans was in the Arctic region. Tilak's theory was detailed in his book, *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, which was published in 1903. However, this theory did not gain widespread acceptance among scholars and has been criticized for lacking evidence and for being based on a selective interpretation of the Vedas. The standard academic view proposes that the Aryans were an Indo-European linguistic community who were pastoralists and migrated from the Central Asian region to Indus and later to the Gangetic plains. They migrated at a gradual and slow pace and laid the foundation of Vedic culture. However, the Harappan Civilization was alien to them. Romila Thapar argues that "Arya" does not have a racial connotation and that there was no invasion, but rather a migration in small groups motivated by pastoralism and trade. This conclusion is based on a lack of archaeological and literary evidence for large-scale migration. On the other hand, the indigenous Aryan proponents consider India as the homeland of Aryans, and they migrated to other parts of the globe and established great civilizations. The recent discoveries in ancient DNA analysis, nevertheless, favour the standard view.

- ◆ No invasion, but small - scale migration

3.1.1.1 Indo-Aryans and the Harappan Culture

We have surveyed the basic questions about the Aryan identity. Now, let us locate them in the vast period of Indian history. The Orientalists and Indologists in the nineteenth century believed that the Aryan culture had been the foundation of the Indian civilization. All the Vedas and epics which these scholars construed as great scholarly works belonged to the Indo-European language speakers. However, the discovery of the Harappan civilization in the 1920s extended the early history of India further back in time. It is argued that the mature Harappan civilization existed between 2600-1900 BCE. On the other hand, the early Aryan migrants placed their foot on Indian soil only by 1500 BCE. What's your conclusion here? The Harappan civilization is older than the Vedic people. Nevertheless, the possible interaction between the Harappans and the Aryans remained a matter of debate among historians.

- ◆ Interactions between the two social formations- Harappan culture and Indo- Aryans



◆ *The theory of Aryan invasion and the decline of the Harappan Civilization*

Mortimer Wheeler has argued that the Aryan invasion led to the decline of the Indus Valley civilization. He found an 'H' shaped cemetery from Harappa that showed around 26 skeletons in a single pit. For Wheeler, this is a symbol of massive violence that erupted against the Harappan people. His argument encouraged a group of scholars to propose the Aryan Invasion theory. However, evidence from a single site could not be used to explain the decline of such an extensive civilization as the Harappa. Wheeler's viewpoint was the first trigger for the contestation about the relationship between the Indus civilization and the Aryan culture.

◆ *Differences between the Harappan civilization and the Aryan culture*

There are many cultural differences between the Harappan civilization and the Aryan culture. The Harappan civilization was primarily urban and located in the North-West regions of India, whereas the Aryan culture had been rural and extended in the North-East parts. The trade was well-flourished in the Harappan regions. However, the Aryan culture was predominantly pastoral though they had practised agriculture occasionally. It is evident that the early Aryan culture was less populated than the Harappan civilization. The social complexity of the Harappan civilization is absent in Aryan culture because the Aryan culture was basically tribal in nature. Horses and chariots were absent in the Indus civilization, however, horses and horse-driven chariots were integral to the Vedic people and their everyday life. There were some attempts to fabricate the horse image in a Harappan seal to prove that the civilization had been a creation of the Aryans. Yet, those attempts miserably failed. No images or sculptures with horse shapes were found in the Harappan sites. Along with that, the Harappan civilization was a bronze age civilization, while the Aryan culture had to expertise to use iron objects. The shreds of evidence historians use to study these civilizations are problematic too. The history of Harappan civilization has been traced primarily through archaeological artefacts. Though there are written inscriptions, the language is yet to be deciphered. On the other hand, the early Aryan culture is derived from Vedic literature. This is a culture carved out of language and literature. The simple, tribal society of the Aryans did not leave many relics behind. These differences evidently show that the Harappan civilization and the Aryan culture are completely different in their composition and formation.

However, there were some exchanges between these two social formations. What do you understand when hear

◆ Socio-cultural interactions between post-Harappans and the migrated Aryans

about the decline of civilization? Does it mean that the entire population had been wiped out? No. The decline of the Harappan civilization, in our context, means that the civilization had lost its urban characteristic. People fled from the cities for some reason or the other. By 1900 BCE, the post-Harappan phase started leaving cities, people relocated to nearby villages, or started new agrarian settlements. It is to these agrarian settlements the early groups of the Aryan people migrated. The recent genetic studies of old DNA show that the decline of the Harappan civilization led to two streams of population migration. One set migrated to South India, combined with the local inhabitants, and formed Ancestral South India (ASI). The other stream lived in the adjacent regions of the Harappan civilization. These people were mixed with the Aryan migrants and formed Ancestral North Indians (ANI). There are loanwords in Vedic texts other than old Sanskrit indicating the intermingling of the different populations with the Aryans. Some of the legacies of the Harappan civilizations were continued. e.g., worship of a pipal tree, yoga, etc. We cannot put civilizations into watertight compartments, as the history of humankind is a history of interactions and exchanges. Therefore, it is quite clear that the post-Harappan people had socio-cultural interactions with the Aryans.

3.1.2 Vedas and its Historicity

◆ Classification of Vedas

Vedas are a collection of religious texts which are regarded as the oldest literary records of the Indian subcontinent. The word “Veda” means knowledge in Sanskrit. As mentioned earlier, *Vedas* were composed in the early Vedic period by Aryans, who migrated and established their settlements in the northern part of the subcontinent. There are four Vedas: *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. Each of these Vedas is further divided into several sections, including hymns, rituals, and philosophical discussions. The *Rig Veda* is the oldest and most important of the Vedas, containing over a thousand hymns. The Vedic people worshipped the natural forces and their collection of prayers to gods including *Agni*, *Mitra*, *Indra*, *Varuna* and so on, are included in the *Rig Veda*. The *Yajur Veda* contains hymns and sacrificial formulas, while the *Sama Veda* consists of melodies and chants. The *Atharva Veda* is a collection of hymns, spells, and incantations that deal with daily life, disease, and social issues.



◆ *Parts of Vedas*

Each *Veda* has four parts, the *Samhita*, *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka*, and *Upanishad*. *Samhitas* are the main collection of Vedic hymns. They are ritualistic texts which explain the importance of rituals. While, the *Brahmanas* are prose explanations of the *Samhita* portions and give details and explanations of sacrificial rituals and their outcomes, the *Aranyakas* interpret sacrificial rituals symbolically and philosophically. The *Upanishads* deal with philosophical speculations.

◆ *Rig Veda and interpolations*

The *Rig Veda Samhita* is the oldest collection of poetry in the world, containing 1028 hymns arranged in 10 *mandalas* or books. Out of the 10 books, books 2 to 7 are the earliest parts and books 1 and 10 is considered to be the later additions. *Rig Veda* and *Zend Avesta*, the oldest text of Iranian language, has used same names of gods and social classes. There are many interpolations in the Vedic texts which should be considered while reconstructing history from them. The first and tenth books in *Rig Veda*, which belong to a much later period and may possibly represent the condition of later Vedic times. Numerous rituals are found in later- Vedic texts in addition to hymns.

◆ *Vedangas*

There are supplementary works known as *Vedangas*, that help with the proper recitation, use, and understanding of the Vedas. It covers phonetics (*Shiksha*), metre (*Chanda*), grammar (*Vyakarana*), etymology (*Nirukta*), ritual (*Kalpa*), and astronomy (*Jyotisha*) and was composed between 600-200 BCE.

◆ *Historicity of Vedas*

Despite their cultural and historical significance, the historicity of the Vedas has been the subject of much debate and controversy. When trying to use the Vedas as a source of historical information, one of the challenges is determining when the *Rig Veda* was composed. Scholars have suggested various dates for its composition, ranging from 6000 BCE to 1000 BCE. However, most historians agree that the early Vedic literature was likely composed between 1500-1000 BCE, while the later Vedic texts were composed between 1000-500 BCE. These dates were first suggested by Max Muller in the 19th century and are still commonly used as a framework for understanding the chronology of the Vedas.

The Vedic culture reflected through the Vedas represents a period of about a millennium. That is, the Vedic literature sheds light on the large-scale transitions that occurred in social formations. The period is known as the Vedic age because the main source at the historian's disposal to discern the period

◆ *Classification of Vedic Age*

has been the Vedas. The period is classified into two sections; Rig Vedic Age and the Later Vedic Age. *Rig Veda* represents the early social formation, which is largely pastoral, in northwest regions of the Indian subcontinent. However, the later Vedic period demonstrates the formation of a complex society. As mentioned earlier, the transitions that took place during the period have been the result of some intricate social processes. When the early period indicates cultural overlapping of Vedic culture and post-Harappan culture, as evident from the archaeological sources, the later period manifests a set of socio-political changes culminating in the formation of larger kingdoms and mighty empires. Let us have a look at these sophisticated social transformations that took place between 1500 - 700 BCE in the Gangetic plains.

3.1.3 PGW Culture

◆ *PGW culture - An agrarian village culture*

The type of pottery found at the Indo-Gangetic plains that belong to the Vedic and later Vedic periods is classified as PGW. The PGW pottery was 'very fine, smooth, and even-coloured pottery, with a thin fabric'. PGW was first identified at Ahichchhatra in the 1940s. However, it became notable with the Hastinapur excavations. The chronological and geographical location of PGW culture indicates that these archaeological remains belong to a society which is represented by the Vedic texts. PGW culture is mainly related to village settlements, but the PGW sites were of semi-urban in nature. These sites have fortified settlements and planned public streets. However, the major PGW sites represent an agrarian society. It is argued that people of PGW culture cultivated rice, wheat, barley etc. They also domesticated animals like horses, cattle etc. This culture is roughly estimated between 1100 - 600 BCE. Therefore, the PGW culture found in the Indo-Gangetic plain provides archaeological data for the study of the Vedic and later Vedic periods. It was followed by NBPW(Northern Black Polished Ware) culture, which represents the rampant use of iron technology and the emergence of urban centres. The technological advancement of the period enabled society to make more refined pottery. PGW culture had not been exclusively the Vedic period. The archaeological excavations could trace the overlapping of post-Harappan culture with PGW culture in some sites.

3.1.4 Post – Harappan Cultures

Harappan Civilization can be divided into three phases; Early Harappan, Mature Harappan and Post-Harappan. The



◆ *Post-Harappan phase - Decline of urban features*

Early Harappan phase belongs to a period when the agrarian settlements produced a surplus sufficient to maintain an urban population. It facilitated the emergence of urban centres and the commencement of the mature phase. The main features of civilization, such as writing, measurements, planned cities, urbanism etc., belong to this phase. However, by 1900 BCE, the urban features of the civilization gradually declined, and people began to move out of the cities. They abandoned cities and migrated to the surrounding village settlements or started new settlements. This phase is known as post-Harappan culture. The Harappan people who migrated to the South had intermingled with the indigenous people. Those who had lived in the adjacent regions of erstwhile cities had interacted with the Indo-Aryans. The mingling of Indo-Aryans with the local population is evident from the loanwords in the Vedic texts. The process got intensified in the later Vedic period, as shown in the high rate of 'foreign' words in the later Vedic literature.

◆ *Overlapping of post-Harappan culture and PGW culture: Traces of cultural continuities*

PGW sites also produce evidence for these interactions. These two cultures which manifests that the Post-Harappan culture had influence over the Indo-Aryan culture in many ways. As pastoral societies, the Indo-Aryans should have interacted with the agrarian societies around them for essential commodities and information. The post-Harappan culture is represented by the 'Cemetery H' culture in archaeological sites like Bhagawanpura and Dadheri in Haryana, implying the co-existence and overlapping of the 'Cemetery H' culture and PGW culture. However, such sites are located in the North-West part of the subcontinent. As it comes to the heartland of Gangetic plains, the evidence of interaction has dwindled. What's your conclusion at this juncture? As we know, the Harappan civilization emerged in the North-West regions, and the majority of post-Harappan cultures were also located in the same regions. On the other hand, the migration eastward took place in the later Vedic period. Though the Indo-Aryans interacted with the indigenous population, the remnants of post-Harappan culture had been comparatively less in those regions. The interaction between post-Harappan culture and Indo-Aryan culture reveals the fact that there were changes and continuities in history.

3.1.5 Features of Pastoral Society

The Vedic society had been pastoral. Cattle rearing was their main occupation and mode of economic activity. The

◆ *Anthropological theories for understanding Vedic society*

texts show traces of pastoral life during the period. However, the historians working on the Vedic society bring insights from anthropology to understand the socio-economic meaning of the Vedic narratives. The theoretical concepts of anthropology are employed in the analysis of the text, starting from the basic assumption that Vedic society was pastoral. The use of anthropological models disclose the features of Vedic social formation.

◆ *Resource gathering and distribution*

The pastoral society is mobile, always on the move for pastures and settlements. In this journey, they have to face vagaries of natural forces. The conception of divinity in these communities sometimes is influenced by this grave reality. They worshiped natural forces such as the sky, wind, fire, earth etc. The archaeological remains would not be plenty because of the constant mobility of the pastoral population. The size of society is comparatively small, and the division of labour is minimal. The division of labour is based on age and sex. The young male would always be the leader of the group since they guide and protect the rest. However, the resources they gathered, either through booty or through the exchange, were distributed among the members of the society. What does it mean? The old, sick and children would also get a due share of the resources collected. Though individual households owned animal flocks, pastures were construed as common property.

◆ *Importance of cattle in the pastoral society*

Unlike the tribal or agrarian societies, attachment to a particular locality is not evident among the pastoralists. They are hardly attached to a region because of their nomadic nature. The main form of wealth is cattle in pastoral society, and cattle rearing is the major occupation. Their lives revolve around the cattle they own. In some pastoral societies, cattle are taken as sacred animals. It is not only the livelihood, but also the major resources of the society are connected with the cattle. Many of the words in their language are attributed to pastoral life. The animal flock they own and care about is the crux of their socio-political and economic life.

As mentioned above, the Rig Vedic society had largely been pastoral. They knew the geography of Afghanistan and the Indus region. The geographical stretch of Rig Vedic society is, therefore, identified as the Sapta Sindhu region. That is, the society was mainly located in the North-West region. Hastinapura, located in present-day Haryana, had been an important location in the Rig Vedic narrative.



- ◆ From Vedic to Later Vedic period: Eastward migration of people

The archaeological excavation of the region indicates the presence of a pastoral community in the post-Harappan period. However, the later Vedic period registers migration to the Indo-Gangetic plains. *Brahmana* and *Aranyakas* mark the process of deforestation and expansion of agriculture in the region. More settlements began to have emerged. The knowledge of iron smelting technology enabled the later Vedic society to fell trees rapidly and to expand the quantity as well as the quality of agriculture. The fertile land of Gangetic plains facilitated this process. What can be seen as a distinct marker of agriculture at this time is the introduction and expansion of rice cultivation. The *Rig Veda* society largely consumed wheat and barley, along with milk and milk products. However, the cultivation of rice changed the main staple of society and encouraged a systematic and organized settlement. In the later Vedic age, we see more prosperous, settled societies which were predominantly pastoral and mobile.

- ◆ From cattle rearing to settled agriculture

As a pastoral society, Rig Vedic people placed economic and ritualistic prominence upon cows. Cattle rearing had been the major economic activity. The main form of wealth was cattle. The linguistic terms and their social etymology reveal this fact. You may have heard the word *gopala*, which literally means the protector of cows. *Gavishti*, the cattle raid, was conducted to increase wealth. Gradually, the meaning of the word changed and became an expression of political power. The need for resources had been resolved through such raids and plunders. The importance of cattle rearing dwindled in the later Vedic period, though the sacredness attributed to cows remained unchanged. Agriculture became the dominant economic activity along with trade. The river networks encouraged the growth of domestic trade. The surplus production made trade possible and it flourished well. The complexity of society produced an intricate system of political power.

3.1.6 Polity

The Vedic texts represent a gradual transition to a monarchical state system from clan-based social bonding. The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the two great epics, manifest the transition to a complex political system. The *Mahabharata* tells about the decline of clan-based political formation and the emergence of kingship and a stable political system. After defeating the Kauravas, the Pandavas ruled over for a long

◆ From chieftdom to kingdom

period of peace and prosperity. What does it show? The text marks the changes in political life and supports kingship for stability and order. On the other hand, we do not find any such rivalry between clan groups in *Ramayana*. It tells the story of people in the Indo-Gangetic plains up to the Vindhya Mountain ranges in the South. The geographical scale that the *Ramayana* represents, which extends up to Lanka, has been a later addition. What is pertinent here is the question of kingship. The *Ramayana* shows a firmly established monarchical state. The tension arose between the two kings, not among some clan groups. The naturalization of kingship in *Ramayana* indicates a society which is ordered under the monarchy. The establishment of monarchy implies the development of a well-defined state system, an inevitable force for a sophisticated social formation.

◆ From clan society to state society

The political life in the Rig Vedic period was simple and lucid. The political head of the society was sometimes called *Rajan*, indicating a chieftain rather than a King. The *Rajan* receives *Bali* and *Bhaga*, the offerings are given voluntarily to the King. *Sabha* and *Samiti* were the two systems for supporting the administration. *Sabha* consists of the elders and venerable persons of the society, whereas *samiti* is a popular assembly. These assemblies assisted the *Rajan* in administrative affairs. Their role in decision-making could not have been neglected. However, in the later Vedic period, the entire power structure got changed. *Rajan* became *Raja* and a powerful king who was destined to rule over vast territories. The clan-based political power transformed into a territory-based state system. The popular assemblies lost significance though *sabha* continued as an advisory body sometimes. The introduction of the taxation system is worth mentioning. The erstwhile voluntary contributions to the chieftains (*Bali* and *Bhaga*) became compulsory legal obligations. It transformed into a compulsory form of tax. This change is pertinent in the emergence of a state system. Systematic administrative processes and order are inevitable for the smooth functioning of a complex society.

As mentioned earlier, the Rig Vedic society was primarily pastoral, and the division of labour was minimal. Therefore, the social stratification had not been severe. The writers of *Rig Veda* called themselves *Aryas*. The rest of the population was termed *dasa* or *dasayu*. This was a simple social division based on language. In the later period, a more complex system emerged based on birth is known as *Varna* system.



◆ The emergence of Varna and Caste society

The mythological origin of the *varna* system is given in *purushasukta* of the 10th mandala of *Rig Veda*. It is argued that the 10th *mandala* was a later addition to the old *Rig Veda*. That is, the *Varna* system was implemented in the later Vedic period. On the basis of birth, society was divided into four *varnas*. This division is somewhat connected to occupation as well. The *Brahmana* is the priestly class, and *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* are the ruling class and producing class, respectively. The fourth *varna*, *Sudras*, are non-Aryans and servant class. Does it mean that the social division of the time was exactly in synchronization with the textual references given above? However, such a division has special significance as far as Indian social life is concerned. In the later Vedic period, society became more complex, and the division of labour got intensified. A new alignment of social forces became indispensable. The caste system emerged in this context. By posting hereditary occupation and purity and pollution in the later phases, caste reorganized the foundational structure of society.

◆ Brahmanical religion and its philosophies

The social complexities discussed above reflect on the religious and ideological systems too. The Rig Vedic Gods, such as Indra, Agni, Varuna etc., lost their importance and new Gods like Vishnu came into force. This change is the transformation from nature worship to the worship of human-formed deities. Religious beliefs and practices also became complicated. Sacrifices became the major form of worship; they became expensive and intricate in due course of time. Ironically, it was in the same period the philosophical speculations of life became widespread. The *Ashrama* concept of life (*Brahmacharya*, *Grahashtasrama*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*) was introduced along with *purushatras* (*Artha*, *Dharma*, *Kama* and *Moksha*). The *Upanishad* philosophy was critical of religious extravaganza. However, the trend could not be reversed since the religious ethos was associated with political interest at this time. The first two *Varnas*, *Brahmana* and *Kshatriya*, wielded ideological and political power in the society. The religious sets that emerged in the sixth century BCE had been a response to the Brahmanical religion and worldview. In brief, the transition from Vedic to later Vedic society had been a transition from a simple pastoral society to a sophisticated settled agrarian society.

Summarised Overview

The question of Aryan identity began with the heydays of British colonialism in India. The Orientalist and Indologist interpretation of the Vedic texts delineated a distinct culture made by the Aryans as the foundation of Indian civilization. They traced out the history by largely drawing upon the similarities of languages and identifying a unique language group: the Indo-European. Some historians argue that the Aryans were those people who spoke Indo-European languages, whereas another group considered them as a distinct race. Another question raised is about the advent of Aryans into the Indian mainland. A set of scholars believed that there had been an Aryan invasion that destroyed the existing civilization. However, recent researches show that the advent of Aryans was not an invasion but a migration. They came as small groups and gradually spread over the Northern part of the Indian subcontinent. However, the debate is not confined to the invasion-migration theme. For a group of people, India is the homeland of the Aryans, and they migrated to other parts of the world from India. Recent genetic studies have almost settled the matter by showing the migration patterns of the Aryans from the Steppe to the Indian subcontinent.

Vedas are a collection of religious texts which are regarded as the oldest literary records of the Indian subcontinent and are believed to have composed in the early Vedic period by Aryans, who migrated and established their settlements in the northern part of the subcontinent. There are four Vedas: *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. The Vedic culture reflected through the Vedic texts represents a period of about a millennium. Vedic Age is classified into two sections: the Rig Vedic Age and the later Vedic Age. The former is largely pastoral, with cattle rearing as the main occupation and mode of economic activity. The latter demonstrates the formation of a complex society with socio-political changes leading to the formation of larger kingdoms. The Vedic society is characterized as mobile, facing natural forces, worshipping natural divinities, and having a small size and minimal division of labor based on age and sex. Private property is not efficiently developed, and pastures are construed as common property. Cattle are the major form of wealth and the crux of their socio-political and economic life.

The Rig Vedic society was largely pastoral, located in the North-West region, and placed economic and ritualistic prominence upon cows. The later Vedic period saw migration to Indo-Gangetic plains, marked by deforestation and expansion of agriculture, facilitated by iron technology and fertile land. Rice cultivation was introduced, changing the main staple of society and encouraging a systematic and organized settlement. The Vedic texts represent a gradual transition to a monarchical state system from clan-based social bonding. The political life in the Rig Vedic period was simple and lucid, with the *Rajan* receiving voluntary offerings and being supported by *Sabha* and *Samiti*. In the later Vedic period, the entire power structure changed, with *Rajan* becoming a powerful king destined to rule over vast territories. The social stratification had not been severe in the Rig



Vedic society, with a simple division between Aryas and *dasa/dasayu*.

Archaeological artefacts are used to categorize social formations, with pottery being a particularly useful indicator of a given period in history. The PGW culture found in the Indo-Gangetic plains had its pottery as fine and even-coloured with distinct designs. The PGW culture is associated with the Vedic and later Vedic periods and is mainly related to village settlements, though some semi-urban sites also exist. The PGW culture is believed to have existed between 1100-600 BCE and was followed by the NBPW culture, which represented the use of iron technology and the emergence of urban centres.

The post-Harappan culture is associated with the coexistence and overlap of the Cemetery H culture and PGW culture. It emerged after the decline of the Harappan civilization. There is evidence of interaction between post-Harappan culture and Indo-Aryan culture. However, such interaction was less common in the heartland of the Gangetic plains. The way in which post-Harappan culture and Indo-Aryan culture interacted reveals historical changes and elements of continuity.

Self Assessment

1. Which linguistic group do the Aryans belong to?
2. Who considered that the Aryan invasion led to the decline of the Indus Valley civilization?
3. Which is the oldest among the Vedic literature?
4. What was the major economic activity in the Rig Vedic Age?
5. What became the dominant economic activity in the later Vedic period?
6. Who is the political head of the society in the Rig Vedic period?
7. Which culture followed the PGW culture?
8. What does NBPW stand for?

Assignments

1. Explain Aryan Invasion Theory, and evaluate the scientific evidence supporting the Aryan Invasion Theory.
2. Critically examine the various alternative theories proposed to explain the origins of the Indo-European languages and the Indo-Aryans in particular.

3. Analyse the idea that suggests the Indo-Aryans were responsible for the decline of the Harappan civilization.
4. Discuss the characteristics of the Pastoral society as reflected in the Vedic texts.
5. Explain the changes in the political system during the later Vedic period, including the emergence of kingship and the transformation from clan-based to territory-based political power.
6. Discuss the features of PGW culture including its pottery and its geographical location.

Suggested Readings

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3. Sharma, R S, *India's Ancient Past*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005.
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6. Trautmann, Thomas, *The Aryan Debate*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.





Urbanization in the Ganges Valley

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ♦ understand the historical forces behind the urbanization in the gangetic Valley
- ♦ discern the theoretical discourse on the transition to the state system
- ♦ find out the origin and relevance of heterodox religions in the 6th century BCE

Background

The Second Urbanization can be construed as a significant landmark in Indian history. It registers a phase of social complexity, state formation, the permeance of trade and commerce etc. It is called second urbanization since the Harappan civilization is taken as the first urban society in the Indian subcontinent. Why is urban life so important for ancient history? In the anthropological model, the establishment of urban society demonstrates the sophistication of social life. The surplus production in agriculture and the associated division of labour facilitates urban life and a complex social formation. Inevitably, the state would emerge to maintain order in such premises of social intricacies. Therefore, in the linear narrative of traditional historiography, the process of urbanization is seen as the marker of civilization. In this unit, let us discuss the socio - political economic and religious transformations that happened in the Gangetic Valley during the later Vedic period.

Keywords

Second Urbanization, Clan, Tribe, Kinship, Kingship, *Janapada*, Heterodox sect



Discussion

3.2.1 Transition from Tribe to State

You may be aware of sociological terms such as clan, tribe etc. If we consider an individual as the basic unit of society, then the next likely form of the institution with which the individual is associated has been nothing but family. Those who claim a common family origin, a common ancestor, are known as the clan. That is, a clan is based on kinship and lineage. The relationship among the members of a clan is decided by a lineage that connects them to mythical or real ancestry. The tribe is a collection of various clans and a more complex social system than the clans. Due to the complexity of tribes, new social institutions and practices emerge.

◆ *Clan- kinship and lineage*

◆ *Tribe- a collection of clans*

◆ *Transision from Kinship to kingship*

This sociological model is applicable to the social formations in the Gangetic Valley during the Vedic and later Vedic periods. By the 6th century BCE, the Gangetic Plain had witnessed the establishment of a monarchical state system along with rapid urbanization. These processes were reciprocal. We will discuss that later. The analysis of the two epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, would reveal the transition from kinship to kingship. *Mahabharata* narrates the intra-tribal conflicts emerged mainly due to the rivalries of the dominant clans. The *Mahabharata* war destroyed the clan-based political system and built a king-based polity in the end. However, *Ramayana* starts with an established monarchical system, and the narrative unfolds through the conflicts among various kings up to the Vindhya region. The current story may have been incorporated in the later centuries.

◆ *Evolution of power and resources redistribution*

The change in the words and their meanings have also demonstrated the transition process. *Vis* is the Sanskrit word used in Vedic literature to imply clan. Gradually, a new word found its due space; *rajanya*. *Rajanya* had been the dominant group among the constellation of clans from which the chieftain- *Rajan*- emerged. In due course of time, the power of *rajanya* increased, and the relationship between *vis* and *rajanya* became hierarchical. The *raja* or chieftains of the clan society was elected on the basis of sex, age and leadership ability. It had not been hereditary or confined to a given clan. In the process of decision-making, the *raja* was assisted by assemblies such as *Sabha* and *Samiti*. We discussed them



in the previous unit. These assemblies were not only the centre of political decisions but also the space where resource re-distribution is taken place. The resource accumulated through cattle raids were brought in and redistributed as per the requirements of the members of society. *Dana* and *Dakshina* were the two forms of resource distribution. *Dana* is a gift given by the dominant, and *Dakshina* is a voluntary contribution to ritual practices. The division or share of the booty wealth is *Bhaga* which is claimed by the *Rajan*. *Bali* was another voluntary contribution made in favour of the ruling class.

◆ *Establishment of a State System*

However, these nascent socio-political and economic systems were replaced by a more subtle and sophisticated social system as the migration to new regions and the establishment of agrarian settlements progressed. The major change visible was the transition from kinship to kingship polity. In other words, it was a transition from a lineage-based system of power to the establishment of a state system led by a powerful monarch.

◆ *Janapada-the territorial state*

One of the visible changes in literature is the frequent use of the word *jana* (tribe). This had been a higher social formation compared to the erstwhile clan society. *Janapada*, which literally means the footing of a tribe- expresses the territoriality of the newly emerged state system. *Janapada* is a geographical region where *jana* (a tribe) is situated, and by this time, it has become a geographical expression with defined boundaries. Instead of being the protector of the clan and guardian of the cattle wealth, the king became the protector of a defined geographical boundary during the period. The state formation, demonstrates the territoriality of the state system that emerged in the 6th century BCE. That is, the elements of a state system- territory, population, government and sovereignty- became firmly established in the Gangetic Valley. Many of these *janapada* came to be known in the name of their ruling clan, indicating the nuanced interlacing of *janapada* and kingship.

◆ *Hereditary Kingship*

Kingship became hereditary at this juncture and fixed to the *Rajanya* section of the former clan groups. Primogeniture was practised, and a lineage system, either mythical or real, was developed to vindicate the exertion of power. Here we see a strong connection between the Brahmins and the *Kshatriyas*. The priestly class, through their pompous religious rituals, facilitated a justification of political power.

The ruling class, on the other hand, often encouraged such rituals and granted special privileges to the *Brahmins*. This nexus is crucial in the political history of ancient India.

The spiritual sanction had not been sufficient enough to administer a kingdom. Certain 'secular' institutions needed to be implemented for the effective functioning of the state. One such initiative was taxation. You may remember *Bali* and *Bhaga* practised in the Vedic period. What was their peculiarity? They were voluntary donations made by the members of the clan society. However, the voluntary nature of such offerings changed to a compulsory form of taxation. The king collected a share of the surplus to meet the 'state expenses'. The compulsory nature of taxation demanded a hierarchy of bureaucracy. The system of bureaucracy has been an integral part of any state system. The bureaucratic structure necessitated the emergence of a distinct social class, and they served as the face of power in various layers of social life.

- ◆ *Compulsory taxation and Hierarchy of bureaucracy*

3.2.2 Agriculture, Trade and Urban Centres

The transition from Rig Vedic society to later Vedic society had been a transition from pastoral society to a settled agrarian society. As we know, the transition had not been resulting in a dramatic shift in social life. It took many centuries to emerge a fully flourishing agrarian society in the Gangetic plains. By the end of the later Vedic period, it is evident from the Vedic literature that the agrarian societies in some regions developed to semi-urban characters with fortified settlements and burgeoning trade. In the chronological history of India, historians mark this phase as a conjuncture of paradigm shift and generally termed the 'Second Urbanization'. After the decline of the urban character of the Harappan civilization, North Indian regions witnessed the advent of pastoral communities and the gradual emergence of agrarian societies in the later period. It had only been in the 6th century BCE that urban centres flourished in various parts of the Gangetic plains. This period is registered not only for the emergence of towns and cities but also for the formation of solid-state systems and new philosophical systems which address social complexities.

- ◆ *Development of urban character in the Gangetic plains*
- ◆ *Second Urbanization*

The city centres flourished in the Gangetic plains in the 6th century BCE, which does not mean that the process happened overnight. The urbanization in the Gangetic plains had been a result of long and intricate social processes. Here comes a



◆ *Surplus food production*

question. Why does the village emerge before the city? What is your response to this problem? Imagine a city. What are the main occupations in city life? Of course, there are many. But we don't find agriculture anywhere on the list. How could it be possible? Where do the city dwellers find food from? It goes without saying that in order to flourish city life, there should be the support of villages. Villages provide food for city dwellers. What does it mean? The agrarian villages produce a surplus, which is sufficient to meet the ever-growing population of the cities. The conclusion is that only in the context of a surplus-producing agrarian society the emergence and continuity of city life would be possible. Let us now examine the historical context of second urbanization in the Gangetic plains.

◆ *Expansion of agriculture and the emergence of new jobs*

The later Vedic period demonstrates the expansion of agrarian settlements in the Gangetic plains. New technologies were used to clear the forest. The use of iron is worth mentioning. Iron axes were more efficient in deforestation, which acted as a catalyst for the rapid expansion of cultivable land. Iron hoe facilitated deep ploughing, which was good for increasing soil fertility. As we have seen in the previous section, new varieties of crops ensured surplus production. The floods in river Ganga and her tributaries enriched the land with alluvial soil. The presence of rivers facilitated unabated irrigation and provided a network of transportation. These socio-economic changes ensued the enhancement of surplus production in agriculture. What would be the consequences of such an accumulation of food? The widening of the social division of labour had been one of the significant impacts of surplus food production. Everyone needs not to be indulged in the production of food. Therefore, the remaining people turned towards new jobs which were in support of agriculture, like carpentry, iron smelting etc.

◆ *Emergence of urban centres*

Refraining from direct food production led to the formation of urban centres because it eventually liberated people from a particular locality (village or fields) and enabled them to move across the regions. There were three kinds of cities that emerged during this period; administrative, commercial and religious. The administrative cities emerged due to the presence of political power in that region. Most of them were the capitals of *Janapada*. While Rajagriha, Shravasti, Kausambi and Champa emerged as political and administrative centres, Ujjain and Taxila became the commercial centres and Vaishali became religious centre.

◆ Different type of cities

On the other hand, economic and commercial activities had been the root cause of the commercial cities. Those were the markets where people came to buy and sell commodities. A monetary system also emerged with the activities of commercial city centres. Religious cities were cultural in essence. They were pilgrim centres or worship places where people from different parts came together to observe religious rituals. The political, economic and cultural gravities determined the nature of the cities during this period. We find terms such as *pura* (city), *nagara* (town), *nigama* (market town), *rajadhani* (capital city), and *mahanagara* (big city) in the literature of this period, indicating the expansion of city life. The emergence of new social elites like *setti* and merchant guilds is also pointing towards rapid urbanization. By this time, major trade routes were also established. Gradually, the Gangetic region entered into a well-established urban life and state system.

3.2.3 Heterodox Religions of the 6th Century BCE and Consequent Social Formation

◆ New religious sects- Resistance to Brahmanical world

As we have seen in the previous sections, state formation, urbanization and caste structure forged together during the later phase of Vedic culture. They had not been isolated developments but interconnected social processes. Urbanization brought about a complex society, and state formation was inevitable to maintain law and order in such a society where social bonding is determined by non-personal relationships. Caste as an ideology and a process cemented these phenomena. By the 6th century BCE, Brahmanic social life became firmly established. Resistance to the dominant form of social life was on the way. The Brahmanical social ideology had been challenged by a set of new belief systems that emerged during this period. Ajivikas, Charvakas, Jainism, Buddhism etc., were the major sects that resisted Brahmanical domination. It is argued that there were at least 32 religious sects that emerged by this time. Fundamentally, these new belief systems criticised social life and the philosophical world behind it. They suggested certain alternative life forms both in social and ideological domains. These religious sects are generally known as *Sramana* religions.

3.2.3.1 Causes for the Formation of Heterodox Religions

There are some historical reasons played behind the forging of new world-views. The main cause was the



◆ *Hierarchy of Varna system and its functioning*

oppressive socio-religious practices insisted on by the Brahmanic religion. The Brahmanic social world revolved around the hierarchy of the Varna system. The social life is divided into four Varnas, and certain occupational functions are attached to each varna. Brahmins belong to the priestly class, Kshatriyas to the ruling class, Vaishyas to the economic class, and Shudras to the servant class. Though the actual wealth is produced by the later two varnas, appropriation of wealth was carried out by the Brahmana and the Kshatriyas through various mechanisms. The nexus between Brahmanas and Kshatriyas were reciprocal and mutually beneficial. While the Brahmanas provided ideological justification for secular power, the Kshatriyas facilitated expensive Brahmanical rituals and sacrifices.

◆ *Heterodox sects and the critique of social inequality, expensive rituals and Brahmanical domination*

However, by this time, it's evident from the literary source materials that a rift occurred between the Brahmanas and Kshatriyas in some regions. Due to the lack of source materials, we cannot trace the responses of Vaishyas and Shudras. Nevertheless, the *Kshatriya* response to the Brahmanical socio-religious system is visible in literary expressions. The sacrifices became expensive and a waste of valuable resources. Such wastage of resources was unbearable for a state system which had been evolving and developing. Meanwhile, it was unavoidable as per the dominant social ideology of the time because the expensive sacrifices demonstrate not only the spiritual vindication of power but also the political and social dominance of the King. In this dilemma, what would be the solution? An alternative ideological system. It is in this context the sramanic religions received wider patronage from the royal houses.

◆ *The growth of Vaishya community and the new religions*

The changes in economic life are also worth mentioning. A major economic change happened in the *Vaishya* community. The progress in agriculture and trade had been the reason for the burgeoning *Vaishya* community. The use of iron technology facilitated the rapid expansion of agrarian settlements. These settlements became the centre of surplus production. The cattle wealth had been important for a settled agrarian society. However, the insistence on animal sacrifice, even for minor rituals, began to affect the animal stock. It adversely affected the plight of the cultivators. Therefore, the Brahmanic rituals naturally solicited the wrath of the agrarian communities. As we discussed earlier, the 6th century BCE witnessed rapid urbanization too. Trade and commerce flourished. It led to the formation of merchant guilds. That is,

the trading *Vaishya* community became an unavoidable part of urban life and became financially influential.

◆ *Economic Changes and Vaishya community*

The wastage of money for unproductive rituals was not welcomed by the Vaishyas. Peace and stability had been indispensable for the growth of trade and commerce. In this scenario, the merchants favoured a philosophy of austerity and non-violence. When they received one, they embraced the new religion wholeheartedly. We need to remember here that the major contributors and propagators of religions like Buddhism were the merchants, and Buddha made important sermons in urban spaces.

◆ *The philosophical solution for social crisis*

The new religions provided philosophical solutions to the contemporary social crisis as well. The complex social relationships and hierarchical social structure eventually brought in a social crisis. Except for the Brahmanas, all other segments of society were disappointed with the current social ethos. The hierarchical structure led to the search for social equality. Therefore, the new religious beliefs professed social equality, which was received well by the subordinate social groups. In one part of society, luxurious life became the rule of the day. Such a life became possible only in the context of material prosperity. Though material prosperity ensured the satisfaction of material needs, the divided, violent social system could not provide spiritual/ideological assistance. However, the new religions asked for simple and restrained life. This was a way out of the current social predicaments for a considerable section of society. Even people from materially rich backgrounds were willing to embrace a kind of ascetic life professed by these religions. That is, the sramanic response to Vedic practices had multi-layered impacts.

◆ *Major setback for the Brahmanical religion*

We have discussed the historical causes which led to the formation of heterodox religions in the 6th century BCE. These religions were a response to the contemporary social life dominated by the Brahmanical ideology. The critiques emanated from various corners dismantled the ideological hegemony of Brahmanism. The sacrificial rituals lost their importance in the public domain, at least ideologically. Disciplined life and mediation became new methods of religious belief. The new religions stood for the value of life and social peace. It encouraged many later generations to strive for a more generous society. The structured imagination for an egalitarian society was presented through



these ideological systems. The critique of the caste system was a severe blow to the foundation of the Brahmanical social world. As the royal patronage inclined to new religions, the political support enjoyed by the Brahmins earlier had been lost. The Brahmanical discourse got a strong political ally only after the decline of the Mauryan empire.

- ◆ The global influence of heterodox religions

The heterodox religions presented a new philosophical world for social life. Rather than the metaphysical discourses of the earlier philosophy, the heterodox religions of the century were more concrete and life-centred. Sometimes they were silent about the existence of God or any such transcendental powers. This intervention can be seen as a philosophical paradigm shift in Indian history. New ideas like non-violence preached by these sects still resonate. The main followers of these religions were, as mentioned earlier, the merchants. It facilitated the spread of religious ideas to different parts of the world. The emergence of new religious beliefs in the 6th century BCE had been a revamping of the social life in the Gangetic plains during the period.

3.2.3.2 Heterodox Religions

Ajivikas

- ◆ Ajivika school of philosophy

The Ajivikas were a significant philosophical school that emerged in India during the same period as Jainism and Buddhism. As part of the *Nastika* philosophy, which rejects the authority of the Vedas, the Ajivikas developed their distinct philosophical outlook. The founder of the Ajivika school was Goshala Maskariputra, who is said to have been associated with Mahavira, the founder of Jainism.

- ◆ Concept of Niyati

One notable aspect of Ajivika philosophy is its professed belief in total determinism regarding the transmigration of souls or the cycle of rebirth. While other philosophical groups believed in the potential for individuals to improve their circumstances throughout this cycle, the Ajivikas purportedly asserted that the entire universe was governed by a cosmic force called *niyati*. According to their worldview, *niyati* determined all events, including an individual's fate, down to the minutest details. Furthermore, the Ajivikas held the view that all change was illusory, considering everything to be eternally static. During the Mauryan rule, the Ajivika school of thought gained prominence for a period.

Charvakas

◆ Key tenet of Charvaka

Charvaka, an influential philosophical school also known as Lokayata, constitutes a significant aspect of ancient Indian intellectual discourse. This philosophical tradition, attributed to Brihaspati, upholds direct perception, empiricism, and conditional inference as reliable and valid sources of knowledge. In doing so, it embraces philosophical skepticism while firmly rejecting ritualistic practices and supernatural beliefs. One key tenet of Charvaka philosophy is the rejection of concepts such as *karma*, rebirth, and an afterlife. The Charvakas do not subscribe to the notion that actions have consequences in future lives or that there is an existence beyond the present one. Instead, they adopt a materialistic perspective that acknowledges the significance of sensual pleasure. Charvaka emerged as the principal advocate of materialistic philosophy, known as Lokayata, which espoused ideas derived from the common people. According to Charvaka, since pleasure and pain are intrinsically connected, wisdom lies in seeking pleasure and minimizing pain to the greatest extent possible.

◆ Challenged Other Religions

The Charvakas also challenge many established religious conceptions held by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Ajivakas. They question the validity of beliefs in an afterlife, reincarnation, the cyclical nature of existence (*samsara*), the law of cause and effect (*karma*), and various religious rites. Furthermore, the Charvakas critically evaluate the authority and teachings of the Vedas and Buddhist scriptures, expressing skepticism towards these foundational religious texts. Moreover, the Charvakas assert that inference, a form of logical reasoning, cannot be employed to determine metaphysical truths.

Jainism

◆ Mahavira as twenty-fourth Tirthankara

The Jains believed that their foremost religious teacher, Mahavira, was preceded by twenty-three tirthankaras, or spiritual leaders. Considering Mahavira as either the final or the twenty-fourth *tirthankara*, the origins of Jainism can be traced back to the ninth century BCE. Some Jains attribute the title of the first *tirthankara* and teacher of Jainism to Rishabhdev. According to one tradition, Vardhamana Mahavira was born in 540 BCE in a village near Vaishali, which corresponds to Basarh in the Vaishali district of northern Bihar. Initially leading the life of a householder, Mahavira renounced the world at the age of 30 in pursuit of



truth, embracing an ascetic lifestyle. Over the span of twelve years, he traversed various locations, spending no more than a day in a village and five days in a town. Throughout his arduous twelve-year journey, Mahavira is said to have never changed his clothes until he reached the age of 42 when he attained omniscience (known as *kaivalya*), at which point he discarded his garments entirely. For a period of thirty years, Mahavira propagated his religious teachings, undertaking missions to regions such as Kosala, Magadha, Mithila, Champa, and other places.

◆ *Teachings of Mahavira*

According to Mahavira, an individual's birth in a higher or lower varna is determined by their past actions and accumulated virtues or sins from previous births. Mahavira, in his teachings, recognizes the inherent human values even within the *Chandala* caste. He believes that individuals from lower castes can attain liberation by leading a virtuous and pure life. In his efforts to propagate the teachings of Jainism, Mahavira established an order of his followers that welcomed both men and women. He delivered his teachings in Prakrit, the language of the common people. Jainism marked a significant departure from the ritualistic Vedic religion and made the first serious attempt to mitigate the evils of the *Varna* system. The early Jainas rejected the use of Sanskrit, which was predominantly patronized by the *Brahmanas*.

Buddhism

◆ *Early life of Buddha*

Gautama Buddha, originally known as Siddhartha, was a contemporary of Mahavira, the founder of Jainism. Born in 567 BCE into a Shakya Kshatriya family in Lumbini, Nepal, near Kapilavastu, he hailed from a noble lineage, just like Mahavira. Being born in a republic, Gautama also embraced certain egalitarian principles. Deeply moved by the suffering experienced by people, he embarked on a quest for a solution. At the age of 29, he renounced his worldly life. For approximately seven years, he roamed from place to place, ultimately attaining enlightenment at the age of 35 under a pipal tree in Bodh-Gaya. From that moment forward, he became known as the Buddha, meaning "the enlightened one."

◆ *Buddha's encounter with rival sects*

The Buddha spent the next forty years tirelessly wandering, preaching, and meditating, resting only during the annual rainy season. Throughout this extended period, he encountered numerous steadfast adherents of rival sects,

- ◆ *Buddha addressed worldly problems*
- ◆ *Eightfold path*

including the *Brahmanas*, whom he effectively defeated in debates. His missionary endeavours were not discriminatory, as he welcomed people from all walks of life, irrespective of their social status, gender, or wealth.

The Buddha proved himself to be a pragmatic reformer who acknowledged the prevailing realities of his time. Rather than engaging in futile debates concerning the soul (*atman*) and *Brahma*, which were prevalent in his era, he focused on addressing worldly problems. According to him, the world was permeated with suffering, caused by human desires. Gautama Buddha prescribed the eightfold path (*ashtangika marga*) as a means to alleviate human misery.

- ◆ *Decline of Buddhism*

Over time, Buddhism fell prey to the detrimental influences of Brahmanism, against which it had originally contended. In response to the Buddhist challenge, the *Brahmanas* reformed their religious practices, emphasizing the preservation of cattle wealth and guaranteeing women and shudras admission to heaven. Conversely, Buddhism underwent negative transformations. Gradually, Buddhist monks became disconnected from the daily lives of the populace, forsaking Pali, the vernacular language, in favour of Sanskrit, the language of intellectuals.

Summarised Overview

A transition from a clan-based society to a state-based society happened in the Gangetic Valley during the Vedic and later Vedic periods. The clan was based on kinship and lineage, while the tribe was a collection of clans. By the 6th century BCE, a monarchical state system had emerged, which was led by a powerful monarch and characterized by territoriality. The king became the protector of a defined geographical boundary. Kingship became hereditary and fixed to the *Rajanya* section of former clan groups, and lineage systems were developed to vindicate the exertion of power. The priestly class facilitated a justification of political power, and bureaucracy emerged as an integral part of the state system.

The transition from *Rig Vedic* to later Vedic society resulted in a shift from a pastoral society to a settled agrarian society. The agrarian societies in some regions developed to semi-urban characters with fortified settlements and burgeoning trade during the later Vedic period, which historians mark as the 'Second Urbanization.' The emergence of towns and cities, solid-state systems, and new philosophical systems characterized this phase in the Gangetic plains during the 6th century BCE. The second urbanization resulted from long and intricate social processes, including the expansion of agrarian settlements, the use of iron technology for deforestation and deep ploughing, and the production surplus of food. The surplus



food production led to the formation of city centres that enabled people to move across regions, and there were three types of cities: administrative, commercial, and religious. The political, economic, and cultural gravities determined the nature of the cities during this period. The emergence of new social elites, such as *setti* and merchant guilds, and the establishment of major trade routes also indicated rapid urbanization in the Gangetic region.

The Brahmanic social ideology that dominated the 6th century BCE was challenged by new religious belief systems known as *Sramana* religions, including Jainism, Buddhism, and Ajivikas. These new belief systems criticized the *Varna* system and oppressive socio-religious practices, which caused a rift between the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas. During this time, there were also changes in the economy, with the *Vaishya* community becoming more financially influential due to progress in agriculture and trade. The Brahmanic rituals and animal sacrifice solicited the wrath of the agrarian communities, and the trading *Vaishya* community favored a philosophy of austerity and non-violence. The merchants played a significant role in propagating these new religions.

The emergence of heterodox religions in the 6th century BCE was a response to the Brahmanical ideology dominating contemporary social life. The new religions promoted social equality and a simple, restrained way of life, which appealed to those disappointed with the hierarchical social structure and those seeking spiritual/ideological assistance. The critique of the caste system dealt a severe blow to the Brahmanical social world, and as royal patronage shifted towards new religions, the political support enjoyed by the Brahmins waned. The heterodox religions presented a more concrete and life-centered philosophical world, emphasizing non-violence and value for life, and were embraced by merchants, facilitating their spread to different parts of the world.

Self Assessment

1. Define clan.
2. What is meant by 'second urbanization'?
3. What are the main features of second urbanization?
4. When did the second urbanization take place in the Gangetic plains?
5. What is the meaning of the word *jana*?
6. What is *Setti*?
7. Which varna flourished in the 6th Century BCE?
8. What are the basic elements of a state system?
9. What do you understand by the term *janapada*?



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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.





Janapadas

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ♦ understand the formation of *mahajanapada*
- ♦ historicize the process of state formation in ancient India
- ♦ assess the significance of Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) culture

Background

The historical analysis of social formations during the Vedic and later Vedic periods revealed the fact that social life was getting intricate by various socio-economic factors. New social systems and institutions are needed to control and guide these novelties. The history of the period narrates the emergence of new social structures in order to meet the requirements of society. Textual and archaeological sources demonstrate the gradual changes in social life. Archaeologically, the transition from the Vedic period to the times of Buddha was a transition from PGW culture to NBPW culture. The former represents agrarian society, and the latter stands for urban society. The sophisticated social life necessitated a complex state system. That is, there should be an institution to regulate or mediate the relationship between the persons in the society. This makes the state an inevitable factor in any complex social life.

We have been analysing the social transformations that took place in the Gangetic plain since the advent of the Aryans. The survey shows the formation of diversified and complex societies. Starting from the nomadic pastoral life, the migrants settled for agriculture in later years. Most of them were on the Gangetic plains. These settled communities, in due course of time, became complex by adopting social hierarchy and political dominance. The economic activities received great momentum. Agriculture and trade flourished. The surplus encouraged the formation of cities which later became the centres of political and economic power. Social relations changed from personal bonding to legal structures. The division in society brought in resistance too.



New forms of philosophical discourses sprang up, criticising contemporary social life. From the perspective of archaeologists, this period marks the period of Northern Black Polished pottery, indicating the widespread use of iron as primitive metal. Even though the general picture manifests a linear progression from pastoral society to settled agriculture to urban life, the social features and political systems had not been alike everywhere. There were other forms of polity that existed during the period. This unit looks into such an intricate political process that occurred during the 6th century BCE.

Keywords

PGW, NBPW, *Vis*, *Jana*, *Janapada*, *mahajanapada*, *Gana Sangha*, State, Polity, Private Property

Discussion

3.3.1 Growth of *Mahajanapada* and Changes in the Political System

We have discussed earlier that *jana* is a term used in literature to signify a tribe. It differs from *vis* (clan). *Janapada* is the territorial representation of a tribe which literally means the foot of the people/ tribe. Many *janapada* came to be known after the tribe's name. In the purview of political theory, the transition from *vis* to *jana* and *jana* to *janapada* demonstrate the changes from clan-based societies to tribe-based societies and to the territoriality of the tribal settlements. *Janapada* has been, therefore, a political signifier of the territorial state. Pali texts refer to more than 200 *janapada* by this time. The majority of them were situated in the upper and mid-Gangetic plains, and towns acted as their capital. The powerful *janapada* were Magadha, Kosala, Avanti and Vatsa. However, the Buddhist texts unfurl that some *janapada* were larger and stronger than the rest. A new word was introduced to denote the existence of large *janapada*; *mahajanapada*. That is, the *janapada* were growing in economic and political strength. The Pali texts have identified 16 *mahajanapada*; Magadha, Anga, Vriji, Mallas, Kashi, Kosala, Vatsa, Kuru, Panchala, Matsya, Shurasena, Kamboja, Gandhara, Avanti, Chedi and Assaka.

- ◆ *Vis to Jana-Jana to Janapada-Janapada to Mahajanapada*



They consisted of larger geographical areas and populations. The burgeoning trade and surplus production in agriculture acted as a catalyst for the emergence of *mahajanapada*.

◆ *Magadhan expansion*

In order to become the most powerful state at the time, Magadha expanded to include the erstwhile districts of Patna, Gaya, and portions of Shahabad. Rajgir, later Pataliputra, served as its capital. Both were fortified and have evidence of settlements dating to the fifth century BCE. The state of the Vajjis, which included eight clans, was located in the Tirhut division, north of the Ganges. The Lichchhavis, whose capital was located at Vaishali, which shares a border with the hamlet of Basarh in the Vaishali region, were the most powerful dynasty. According to archaeological evidence, Vaishali's antiquity is pushed considerably further back in time by the *Puranas*, yet Basarh was not inhabited until the sixth century BCE.

◆ *Kashi and Kosala*

The kingdom of Kashi, with Varanasi as its capital, is located further west. Although Kashi first seemed to be the most powerful state, it later fell to Kosala's dominance. Shravasti, which is coterminous with Sahet-Mahet on the boundaries of the Gonda and Bahraich districts of Uttar Pradesh, served as the capital of Kosala, which included the territory currently held by eastern UP. Despite the fact that Sahet-Mahet only began to be occupied in the sixth century BCE, we can nevertheless detect the earliest signs of a mud fort. Ayodhya, a significant city in Kosala, is connected to the story of Ramayana. However, excavations indicate that it was not settled on any significant scale prior to the fifth century BCE. The tribal republican territory of the Shakyas of Kapilavastu was also part of Kosala. The Republican clan of the Mallas, whose territory reached the northern boundary of Vajji state, was located in the Kosala area. Kushinara is coterminous with Kasia in Deoria district.

◆ *Vatsa and Avanti*

The Vatsa kingdom was located further west along the Yamuna riverbank, with its capital at Kaushambi close to Allahabad. A Kuru clan known as the Vatsas relocated from Hastinapur and settled in Kaushambi. Kaushambi was chosen due to its proximity to the Ganga and Yamuna river confluence. Excavations reveal the existence of a mud fortress which belongs to the fifth century BCE. The state of Avanti is located in the centre of Malwa and the surrounding regions of Madhya Pradesh. It was split into two sections: the northern

◆ *Kuru, Panchala and Magadha*

section, which had Ujjain as its capital, and the southern section, which had Mahishamati. From the fifth century BCE onwards, both of these settlements gained certain status, while Ujjain ultimately overtook Mahishamati. It established extensive ironworking and built strong fortifications.

The ancient states of the Kurus and Panchalas, which were in western UP, no longer held the political importance as they did in the later Vedic era. From the sixth century BCE onward, the struggle for supremacy among these kingdoms dominated India's political history. The Magadha kingdom eventually became the most powerful and established as an empire. Gandhara and Kamboja were significant *mahajanapada* in the northwest. In the Pali literature, Kamboja is referred to as a *mahajanapada* and a *janapada*, respectively. It was located in the Pamir region of Central Asia, which largely covered modern Tajikistan. The remnants of a horse, chariots with spoked wheels, cremations, and *swastika*, all of which are connected to Indo-Aryan speakers and dated between 1500 and 1000 BCE, have been discovered in Tajikistan. Both Sanskrit and Pali were spoken in Kamboja, which the *uttarapatha* connected to Pataliputra, around 500 BCE.

◆ *Incorporation of small states through diplomacy and conquest*

The transition from *janapada* to *mahajanapada* could not be confined to material prosperity and mass migration. There were deliberate political attempts to widen the boundaries, a definite outcome of territorial statehood. You may remember the cattle raids during the *Rig Vedic* period. The chieftains go to war so as to accumulate cattle wealth. However, by this time, wars were fought for land. Controlling more lands means controlling more resources which eventually enhances the power of the King and provides justification for his leadership. In the *Arthashastra*, a new theory was introduced, which may throw light on the actual historical process of this period; *Matsya nyaya*. In the ocean, small fishes are eaten up by big fishes and big fishes are eaten up by even larger fishes. That's the rule of the sea. Likewise, the annexation of small states by large ones is justifiable. Conquest and diplomacy were employed by the *mahajanapada* to insert the surrounding *janapada* into their kingdoms.

The formation and development of *mahajanapada* are evident from the history of Magadha. Magadha's growth is attributed to many socio-political and environmental factors. This *mahajanapada* had able leadership. Bimbisara



◆ *Political and environmental location*

and Ajathasatru were effective military and political leaders who deployed war and diplomacy rationally. It expanded the boundaries of Magadha. The geographical location of Magadha was important. It is situated in the middle of the Gangetic plains, surrounded by mountains and rivers. The rivers acted as a network of communication and commodity exchanges. Floods in these rivers fertilized the land. The adequate rainfall maintained surplus production in agriculture, and dependency on irrigation was subsidized.

◆ *The rise of Magadhan Empire*

Another geographical advantage was the deposits of iron ore. The availability of iron was so essential in clearing forests and cultivating and making tools. You may remember that it was an iron age culture. The unabated flow of primary material provided a great advantage for Magadha. The capital city of Magadha, Rajgir, was surrounded by hills and rivers which functioned as natural boundaries. The presence of forests provided an additional advantage for Magadha. Horses and chariots were the main weaponry of the time. But, Magadha had a strong array of elephantry, unlike the other *janapada*. It provided them with an upper hand on the battlefields. Along with the surplus production in agriculture, the Magadha rulers promoted trade. The towns had markets where people from various parts came together to exchange commodities. The use of metal money facilitated easy transactions. The exposure to different ideas circulated through the markets helped the Magadha society to be liberal and unorthodox. The development of Magadha to a *mahajanapada* and to the first empire of the Indian Subcontinent in the later period reveals the nature and scope of *mahajanapada* in the 6th century BCE.

3.3.2 Janapada Polity

◆ *Gana-sangha as an alternative form of kingdom*

Vis had chieftains, termed *raja* in the Vedic literature. They were clan leaders emerging from a leading family. In due course of time, a given section emerged within *Vis* who devoted themselves as the *raja* of the clan. This group is known as *Rajanya*. The *Rajanya* group can be seen as the proto-ruling class. Gradually, the *Rajanya* class began to keep their distance from the rest of the population. The nature of polity and political life had been changed. We have seen those changes in the previous units. The King emerged as the head of political life and its institutions. The kingship altered the political landscape. However, the kingdom was not the only form of the political system. *Janapada*, due to their vastness and diversities, had produced versatile political formations.

There were two major forms of polity; *Gana-sangha* and Kingdom. Let's examine the features of *Gana-sangha*.

◆ The representative nature of *Gana-sangha*

The nationalist historians used to present the historical presence of democracy and republicanism by showing the *Gana-sangha* in Indian history. Some historians labelled them as oligarchies. Nevertheless, *Gana-sangha* was a significant political structure that existed in many *janapada* during the period. Geographically, many of these *janapada* were located in the northwest part. The land was less fertile and located in hilly areas. These *janapada* existed in the peripheries of the kingdom. *Gana-sangha* is an amalgamation of two words; *gana* means the group of equals, and *sangha* means an assembly. Therefore, *Gana-sangha* were an assembly of equals. The chieftain of the clan governed with the help of these assemblies. However, they were not popular assemblies. Only the ruling elites could participate in *Gana-sangha*. It can either be a single clan or a confederacy of clans.

◆ *Gana-sangha* : the proto-state

The *Gana-sangha* political formation lies outside the ambit of *Brahmana* tradition. The Brahmanical political discourse always favours kings who maintain the social order, that is, the *varnashrama dharma*. However, *Gana-sangha* never followed the Brahmanical traditions dogmatically. They had only two social segments; the *Kshatriya raja kula* and *dasa-karmakara* (ruling families and the slaves/labourers). The estrangement from Brahmanical tradition provided a more liberal space for *Gana-sangha* polity. The assembly used to be held in the main cities. The chieftain is the head of the assembly. This post was not hereditary, unlike kingship. He might be the head of a clan or a ruling family. The assembly held discussions on social life in the *janapada*, and if any matter invited a dispute, the issue would be resolved through voting. There were some rudimentary administrative systems, such as the military, that existed in *Gana-sangha*. Therefore, some scholars considered them as a proto-state. The main form of wealth in *Gana-sangha janapada* was agriculture. The land was commonly owned by the clan. They used to hire labour from the *dasa-karmakara*. The working class had no right to be part of the civic life. That is to say, the *gana sangha* was never a democratic polity as the nationalist historians visualized. They were a hierarchical society with their own rules and rituals. It is evident from the literature that the clan leaders residing in the town areas got the upper hand in the decision-making process. It may have encouraged the power shift in the later period.



3.3.3 NBPW Culture

- ◆ *PGW to NBP:
Village to Urban
life*

You may remember the discussion about PGW culture during the Vedic period. Why is pottery so relevant to the study of ancient history? This is more of a historiographical question. There are mainly two sources at the historian's disposal for the study of ancient history; literary sources and archaeological sources. Sometimes, the literary narratives are substantiated by archaeological evidence. Sometimes, the opposite happens. Historians can reach a conclusion about ancient social life only after the counter-analysis of these two sources. PGW presented an agrarian society situated largely in the northwest part of the Gangetic plain. The literary sources of this period also demonstrate the existence of a settled agrarian society that gradually evolved to the semi-urban character. The archaeologists have found another distinct type of pottery belonging to the period of second urbanization; Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW). Let's examine its features and the society it represents.

- ◆ *NBP
associates with
urbanization
and development
of specialized
craft*

The NBPW is black and polished pottery which is more refined than PGW. Pottery making is a very delicate and sophisticated craft. Then what does the refined and polished pottery imply? By this time, society had progressed in technological and artistic domains. They were specialists in crafts. It happens only in a society where surplus production is ensured. The surplus production led to the division of labour and specialization in the given areas in due course of time. The urban centres emerged during the 6th century and also encouraged the specialization of crafts. It's interesting to note that the elites were the main consumers of the NBPW pottery. While PGW had utility value, NBPW had incorporated exchange value along with utility value. The possession of NBPW had been a political and economic statement too. Such craft would develop in a social context where purchasing power of people would be comparatively high. At least, a section of society was capable enough to indulge in luxurious consumption.

- ◆ *NBP as a marker
of iron age
culture*

Historically, NBPW culture belongs to the iron age. Major sites are located in the mid-Gangetic plains. The period of NBPW culture varies. However, the heyday was the 6th century BCE when the Gangetic plains witnessed second urbanization, state formation, growth of trade and hierarchy of social life. It's the successor of PGW culture. What's the conclusion here? The transition from PGW culture to NBPW culture in archaeological sites demonstrates the social

changes from an agrarian society to urban life. This has been the importance of locating archaeological remains in the broader framework of historical narrative.

3.3.4 Territory, State and Religion

Romila Thapar argues that one of the earliest theories of the social contract is the Buddhist account of the origin of the state. Brahmanical tradition prefers the divine origin theory of the state. The King is representative of the god on earth. He was appointed by the god to maintain the Brahmanical social order. On the other hand, the Buddhist texts presented a different story. There was a period when complete harmony existed among all creatures. The decay began as desire entered the human mind. The desire led to ownership. The origin of the family and private property could not be seen separate from this. The strive for private property brought in disputes and conflicts, and such social chaos demanded a controlling authority. King emerged as a result of a social contract to maintain law and order.

- ◆ *The Buddhist version of the origin of the state: social contract*
- ◆ *The Brahmanical version of the origin of the state: Divine origin*

Historically, kingship played a vital role in the state formation and strengthening of kingdoms had been the political history of these centuries. The King signified centralized power and acted as the supreme head of the political system. Kingship was hereditary, followed primogeniture as the basis of succession, and the ruling family became a dynasty. One transition visible in this conjecture is the changing norms of vindication of power. In the clan society, the leader was elected from the clan with the consent of the popular assembly. The introduction of kingship raised a new problem. How could a king claim the source of power? There were two ways to provide authenticity to the King; lineage and rituals. The ruling family became a dynasty by this time. They presented a lineage, either mythical or real, to manifest the continuity of power since the inception of the society. The lineage naturalized and eternalized authority and the questioning of which became intolerable. During the later Vedic period, the nexus between the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas* became strong. The priestly class, through their sacrificial rituals, provided justification for secular power. Rituals like *Asvamedha* guaranteed the political dominance of the king. Like the lineage building, the public show of sacrificial rituals expressed the notion of the divine origin of power.

- ◆ *Kingship and the centralization of power*

Kingship brought about an administrative system as



◆ Kingdom and the administrative structures

well. The social relations were fixed not by personal or community bonding but by the legal system. The King is the embodiment of a legal structure that regulates and governs society. That is, political power began to intrude into social life, defining and determining its course. However, the king as a single person could not have governed such a vast and diverse population as the *mahajanapada*. This is the context of the development of an administrative system. A standing army was formed and maintained. We have seen in *Ganasangha* that the military leader had a role in the assemblies. Nevertheless, under kingship, the military force became subordinated to political power. They maintained law and order, protected people and fought for the expansion of the territorial supremacy of the King. How were the orders of the King implemented? There comes the significance of the bureaucratic system. The government officials were the face of political power at the micro level. They conducted administration at the local level, implemented the orders and regulated public life in favour of the integrity of the kingdom. However, the main function of the bureaucratic system was the collection of taxes. As we have seen before, the compulsory nature of taxation marks the departure from a clan-based society to a monarchical state system. The voluntary contributions of the former - *Bali* and *Bhaga* - became regularized and compulsory. The taxes ensured revenue to the state exchequer and became the systematic model of resource extraction in the state system.

Private property and state formation

The land had been the major source of wealth and political power. Therefore, the kings were keen on the expansion of territorial authority. The annexation of new *janapada* does not mean the widening of the kingdom alone. It meant the extraction of more resources. The conquest became a search for land and its resources. The notion of private property also stimulated this idea. The Kingdom was a kind of private property of the King and he needed to expand it to enhance wealth and power. Therefore, it's evident that private property and state formation are interlinked. The main legal structure was given by the Brahmanical social view before the emergence of *sramanic* religions. The Brahmanical political theory expected the King to be the protector of the caste system. The caste structure had become the new way of social organization. Clan loyalties were replaced by caste localities and loyalties to the king. The state and its embodiment in kingship emerged as a force to negotiate and mediate between the interest of a diverse and hierarchical society.

Summarised Overview

Mahajanapada were large territorial states that emerged in the 6th century BCE in the upper and mid-Gangetic plains of India. The term *janapada* referred to a territorial representation of a tribe, and many *janapada* were named after the tribe's name. The transition from *janapada* to *Mahajanapada* was driven by economic and political factors such as burgeoning trade and surplus production in agriculture. There were deliberate political attempts to widen the boundaries of the *janapada*, and the transition was driven by economic and political factors such as burgeoning trade and surplus production in agriculture. Magadha emerged as a prominent *Mahajanapada* due to able leadership, geographical advantages, and promotion of trade. The geographical location of Magadha, surrounded by mountains and rivers, facilitated communication and commodity exchanges, while the abundant rainfall and deposits of iron ore were significant advantages. The use of metal money facilitated trade, which exposed the Magadha society to different ideas and contributed to its liberal and unorthodox nature. The formation and development of *Mahajanapada* represent a significant shift from clan-based societies to tribe-based societies, marking the beginning of territorial statehood in India.

The heyday of the NBPW culture was during the 6th century BCE, which witnessed the second urbanization, state formation, growth of trade, and hierarchy of social life. PGW is a type of pottery that reflects an agrarian society in the northwest part of the Gangetic plain during the Vedic period. Meanwhile, the NBPW pottery, which emerged during the iron age, represents a more refined and sophisticated society that had progressed technologically and artistically. The possession of NBPW pottery was a political and economic statement for the elites, as it had exchange value in addition to its utility value. The transition from PGW culture to NBPW culture in archaeological sites demonstrates the social changes from an agrarian society to urban life.

Romila Thapar argues that the Buddhist theory of social contract is one of the earliest accounts of the origin of the state. While the Brahmanical tradition favours the divine origin theory of the state, where the King represents the god on earth and maintains the Brahmanical social order, the Buddhist texts present a different story. According to Buddhist texts, complete harmony existed among all creatures, but the decay began as desire entered the human mind, leading to ownership and disputes. The strive for private property brought chaos, which demanded a controlling authority. The King emerged as a result of a social contract to maintain law and order. Historically, kingship played a vital role in state formation and the strengthening of kingdoms. The King acted as the supreme head of the political system, and kingship brought about an administrative system that regulated and governed society.

The main function of the bureaucratic system was the collection of taxes, which ensured revenue to the state exchequer and became the systematic model of



resource extraction in the state system. The land had been the major source of wealth and political power, and the notion of private property stimulated the idea of expanding territorial authority to enhance wealth and power. The state and its embodiment in kingship emerged as a force to negotiate and mediate between the interests of a diverse and hierarchical society.

Self Assessment

1. What is *gana-sangha*?
2. What are the features of *gana-sangha*?
3. What is meant by *janapada* and *Mahajanapada*?
4. Name any five *Mahajanapada* of the sixth-century BCE.
5. How many *Mahajanapada* were identified by the Pali texts?
6. What were the factors that led to the rise of *Mahajanapada*?

Assignments

1. Describe the rise of Magadha as an empire.
2. Provide an account of the *gana-sangha* and explain its difference from the monarchical system.
3. State the socio-economic condition during the *Mahajanapada* period.
4. Prepare a detailed note on the emergence and growth of *Mahajanapada*.
5. Discuss the major features of *Janapada* and *Mahajanapada*.

Suggested Readings

1. Chakravarti, Ranabir, *Exploring Early India up to c. AD 1300*, Third Edition, Primus Books, Delhi, 2016.
2. Jha, D. N., *Ancient India: An Introductory Outline*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2020.
3. Jha, D.N., *Early India: A Concise History*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2004.
4. Sharma, R.S., *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India*, Macmillan Books, New Delhi, 1983.
5. Thapar, R., *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, Oxford University Press, 1997.



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1. Kosambi, D D, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Sangam Books, 2004.
2. Sharma, R S, *India's Ancient Past*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005.
3. Singh, Upinder, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*, Pearson, New Delhi, 2009.
4. Thapar, Romila, *Early India: From the Origin to AD 1300*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2002.
5. Thapar, Romila, *From Lineage to State*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



State Formation in India

BLOCK-04





Emergence of Mauryan Empire under Ashoka

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner would be able to:

- ♦ identify and discuss the rise and fall of the Mauryan dynasty
- ♦ learn the contributions of the Mauryas to the emergence and spread of heterodox religions.
- ♦ familiarise oneself with the salient features of the Mauryan administration.
- ♦ explain Ashoka's Policy of *Dhamma*

Background

In the 5th Century BCE, Magadha transformed into a powerful kingdom that rapidly absorbed its neighbours. Under the Haryanka dynasty, specifically under King Ajatashatru, the Mauryan state developed into an entity that resembled an early empire. However, in 345 BCE, Mahanandin of the fourth dynasty of Magadha (Shishunaga) was overthrown by Nanda ruler Mahapadma Nanda. The Nanda dynasty grew in size and power, absorbing a majority of the old *mahajanapadas* across the Gangetic valley and expanding into central and eastern India.

The Nandas also amassed great wealth and power through a centralised administration that was financed by heavy taxation. The Nandas reached their zenith in 325 BCE, on the eve of Alexander's invasion of the Indus. Exhaustion, fatigue and homesickness among Alexander's troops after defeating Porus on the banks of the Ravi river were made worse by rumours of this great empire that lay beyond the Indus, an empire that commanded more than one hundred thousand infantry and thousands more in cavalry and war elephants. No matter how powerful the Nandas were, they were unpopular among their subjects.

Keywords

Arthashastra, Ashtapradhan, Dhamma, Major Edicts, Dhamma Mahamatras, Sangha



Discussion

4.1.1 Nature of the Mauryan Empire

- ◆ 321 BCE-
Maurya came
to power by
overthrowing of
Dhana Nanda

From the destruction of the powerful Nanda empire, rose another that would shape the history of the Indian subcontinent and the world with a legacy still visible many centuries after its collapse. The Mauryas rose to power in 321 BCE with the overthrow of Dhana Nanda, whose empire spanned most of North and Central India, an empire whose presence was said to have discouraged Alexander's all-conquering Macedonian army from penetrating past the Indus river. The story of the Mauryas starts in the court of the last Nanda emperor, Dhana Nanda. Chanakya, also known as Vishnugupta or Kautilya, fell afoul with the Nanda emperor and swore that he would live to see the destruction of the dynasty. Accounts from various sources give different versions as to what transpired between the Nandas and Chanakya, but his quest for revenge led him to a boy from humble origins. Similar to the origin of the Nandas and Chanakya, Buddhist, Jain and foreign accounts give different narratives about the origin of Chandragupta. Regardless, Chandragupta, groomed for years by Chanakya in statecraft, military strategy and politics would mount a rebellion in 323 BCE to overthrow the Nanda Empire and establish his own from the Magadhan capital of Patiliputra.

Chandragupta Maurya (323-297 BCE)

- ◆ Consolidation
of position in
Magadha

The death of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander in 323 BCE coincided with the fall of the Nanda Empire and the crisis within the Macedonian empire. Chandragupta, in a war of conquest against the Dhana Nanda, had consolidated his position in Magadha by then. Taking advantage of the situation, he pushed towards the west and approached the Indus even as Alexander's *Satraps* engaged in a civil war. Guided by his mentor, Chanakya, and learning lessons from the mistakes of Dhana Nanda, Chandragupta focussed on statecraft and consolidating the bureaucracy to ensure stability in conquered territories.

- ◆ Challenge from
Selucus

As he expanded and consolidated his empire, he would face his first significant challenge, Seleucus. Seleucus was one of Alexander's, *Diadochi* (successors). He was able to defeat the other *Satraps* (generals) and establish an empire of his own across Bactria (Afghanistan), Persia (Iran), The Golden Crescent (Arabia) and the Caucasus, continuing the legacy



of Alexander. Chandragupta had conquered the four Greek *Satrapies* in the Indus valley, defeating Alexander's generals Philip, Nikanor, Eudemus and Peithon in the process.

- ◆ *Military alliance and expansion of territory*

Military historian John D. Grainger argued that Seleucus, upon crossing the Indus, "would find himself in a trap, with a large river at his back and a hostile continent before him," and consequently could not have advanced much farther than the Indus river. Even though the details of the conflict are scarce, what is certain is that Chandragupta drove the invading army back across the Hindu Kush mountains in modern-day Afghanistan and that the war was neither grievous nor was prolonged as both conquerors agreed to settle for peace and agree on an alliance. As part of the alliance, Chandragupta married Helena, Seleucus' daughter and in return, Seleucus gained squadrons of war elephants for his army and peace on his frontier. Chandragupta by 303 BCE had gained territories in parts of eastern Persia (Iran) and modern-day Afghanistan from the Selucids, as his empire spanned across the northern part of the subcontinent and down to the Deccan.

- ◆ *Conversion to Jainism*
- ◆ *Embracement of Sallekhana*

Guided by Chanakya's *Arthashastra*, an early treatise on statecraft, Chandragupta built a powerful empire, far larger than the state of Magadha and the Nandas. In 297 BCE, Chandragupta abdicated his throne for his son and successor Bindusara after accepting Jainism. Retiring to Shravanabelagola, past the southern frontiers of his empire, he passed away after embracing *sallekhana* (fast unto death).

Bindusara (297-273 BCE)

- ◆ *Economic and political stability to the empire*

Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusara. Bindusara's rule was relatively uneventful compared to that of his predecessor but it was a rule that provided both political and economic stability to the empire. The latter part of Bindusara's rule was however dominated by rebellions in Taxila and a brewing war of succession between his two sons, the eldest and heir apparent Susima and the viceroy of Ujjain, Ashoka. What followed was a struggle for the throne that eventually ended with Susima being slain in the imperial capital.

Ashoka (268-232 BCE)

Prior to his victory over Kalinga, Ashoka was known for his aggressive ambition and cruelty. On his rise to the throne at Patliputra, the young prince ruthlessly eliminated all threats, existing and potential, sparing not even his kith

- ◆ 268- Asoka came to power

- ◆ Territorial extent of empire

and kin. After his coronation in 268 BCE, the young emperor embarked on a campaign to expand his realm by any means necessary. On the eve of the war against Kalinga, the Mauryan empire spanned from eastern Persia (Iran) to the Brahmaputra river in present-day Assam and from Bactria (Afghanistan) in the north to the frontiers of Tamizhakam in the south. The powerful Mauryan army that commanded tens of thousands of chariots, over one lakh infantry and thousands of war elephants marched to the kingdom of Kalinga in 262 BCE.

- ◆ Conquered Kalinga in 261 BCE.

After a protracted conflict of outright destruction and attrition, Kalinga was conquered in 261 BCE., albeit at a huge cost. The capital was destroyed and the countryside was laid to waste. One lakh soldiers and subjects of the kingdom lay dead along with more than ten thousand of Ashoka's own troops. According to Buddhist accounts, Ashoka, disgusted and guilt-ridden, renounced his ways of the conquest and vowed to rule in peace, finding refuge from his guilt in Buddhism. More than three centuries had passed since the death of Gautama Buddha but the faith had not found traction outside Magadha. For the next three decades, Buddhism, through missionaries patronised by the emperor himself, would spread across his empire and to neighbouring kingdoms. The relative peace and stability over three decades would enable him to build an efficient administration, and a flourishing economy and develop foreign trade relations with empires and cultures past his doorstep. Under Ashoka's rule, the Mauryan empire reached its zenith.

- ◆ Assassination of Brihadrata

The decline of the Mauryas starts with the death of Ashoka in 232 BCE. His successors were unable to efficiently administer the vast empire and gradually, provinces in the south, north and east broke away from Patliputra. In 185 BCE, the last Mauryan emperor, Brihadrata was assassinated by his *Senapati* Pushyamitra Shunga at a military parade.

4.1.2 Sources

- ◆ Important literary sources- *Arthashastra*, *Mudra rakshasa*, *Indica*

The Mauryas, specifically Ashoka, encouraged the use of the common language, Prakrit in literature and administration over the orthodoxy of Sanskrit. Most literary accounts of the Mauryas were composed centuries after their demise in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit using the Brahmi script. Greek accounts of Chandragupta's and Ashoka's rule were available from the Seleucid ambassadors in the Mauryan court. Chanakya's *Arthashastra*, treatise on polity and governance



covered all aspects of rule from local administration, the conduct of rulers and even foreign relations and diplomatic strategy. It was composed in the early part of Chandragupta's reign, served through the reigns of Bindusara and Ashoka. In *Mudra Rakshasa*, Vishakhadatta narrates Chandragupta Maurya's rise to power aided by his minister Chanakya. *Indica* of Megasthenese, sheds light on the Mauryan administration, the varna system and the reported absence of slavery across the land.

◆ Buddhist and Jaina literature

Buddhist and Jain literature also provides valuable information about the Mauryan empire. The *Jatakas*, one of the oldest classes of Buddhist literature, reveal the social and economic conditions of the Mauryan period. Buddhist chronicles such as *Mahavamsa*, a chronicle of ancient Sri Lanka written in the Pali language, and *Dipavamsa*, the oldest historical record of Sri Lanka, sheds light on the role of Ashoka in spreading Buddhism to Sri Lanka. *Ashokavandana*, written by Buddhist monks in Mathura in the 2nd century of the common era, chronicles Ashoka's ambition of spreading Buddhism. The Jaina *Parishishta Parvan* was composed by Hemchandra. It glorifies Chandragupta's journey to Jainism and his sacrifice by embracing *sallekhana* at Shravanabelagola. The Jaina *Kalpasutra* by Chandragupta's spiritual teacher, Acharya Bhadrabahu captured the Mauryan history through the reign of Chandragupta Maurya. Similar to Buddhist accounts of Ashoka, Jain accounts of Chandragupta tend to glorify and venerate the emperor as the guardian of the faith.

◆ Archaeological and Epigraphical sources

Vast archaeological sources are there which provide valuable information about the Mauryan period. The major archaeological relics of the Mauryans lie in the pillar, cave and rock edicts of Ashoka. Spread all over his empire, they were proclamations of the emperor to the public. A majority of these inscriptions were in Prakrit while some were in Greek and Aramaic. These edicts were deciphered by British archaeologist James Princep in 1837. These proclamations by the emperor also serve as markers of the strength of the Mauryan administration and give us an idea of the extent of Mauryan rule over the subcontinent. Ashoka's transformation as the follower of Buddhism was clearly identified through these edicts. Epigraphical evidence gave detailed information of the economy of the Mauryan empire. The mode of exchange, trade and commerce of the coins in circulation, and so on could be identified from epigraphical evidence.

4.1.3 Administration

◆ Administrative division of Mauryan Empire

Ashoka was an efficient administrator, religious reformer and builder. His relationship to the subjects is more natural and primary. As a sovereign of a large empire, he also recognised his duty of touring the country for the inspection of the country and the people. The Mauryan Empire was divided for administrative purposes into a number of provinces and it was placed under Viceroy. The edicts mention four princely Viceroy. They are those governing the provinces with headquarters at Taxila, Ujjain, Tosali and Suvarnagiri. Sometimes, local chiefs were appointed as Viceroy. The more centrally situated provinces were placed under the Governor directly appointed from the capital by the King. When Bindusara was emperor he appointed his two sons, Susima and Ashoka his Viceroy at Taxila and Ujjain respectively. The viceroys had their own ministers. The Viceroy was empowered to appoint their own officers of the status of *Mahamatras* for periodical inspection and supervision of judicial administration. These viceroys were associated with *Mahamatras* or Ministers. *Mahamatras* or ministers were regarded as Provincial Governors and they were given independent charge of their provinces. These *Mahamatras* were distinguished from other classes of *Mahamatras* by the designation *Pradesika Mahamatras*. *Pradesika Mahamatras* (Provincial Governors) is a class of officers who were expected to tour through their charges completely every five years.

◆ Central administration

The Mauryan administration was centralised, with the emperor as the supreme authority with an absolute monarchy. However, a degree of decentralization existed as the *Mantriparishad* (council of ministers) which was headed by the *Mantriparishad Adhyaksha* assisted him in administration. The *Tirthas* were the highest category of officials in the administration, akin to cabinet ministers. There were 18 *Tirthas*. *Adhyakshyas* ranked next only to the *Tirtha* were 20 in number and possessed economic and military functions. They were followed by *Mahamattas* and *Amatyas* who were essentially high-ranking officials almost like present-day civil servants and secretaries. They were in charge of judicial and administrative functions. The inscriptions of the period mentioned how the king issued his administrative orders. The administrative orders were called *Sasanam* and *anusasanam*. They were written down by the *Lipikara* in accordance with the King's words.



Apart from the crown lands which were directly governed, the empire was divided into four provinces, each under a prince or member of the royal family (*Kumara* and *Aryaputra*). Under Ashoka, there were four provinces: the Northern Province (*Uttarapatha*) with the capital at Taxila, the western province (*Avantiratha*) with the headquarters at Ujjain, the eastern province (*Prachyapatha*) with the centre at Tosali and the southern province (*Dakshinapatha*) with its capital as Suvarnagiri.

◆ Provincial administration

- ◆ The central province Magadha, with its capital at Pataliputra was also the headquarters of the entire kingdom. The viceroy had the power to appoint some of his officials such as the *Mahamattas*, who went on tour every five years.
- ◆ The most important provinces such as Taxila and Ujjain were directly under the command of the princes (*Kumaras*).
- ◆ Provinces were subdivided into districts for purposes of administration and groups of officials were in charge of a district. The three major officials of the provinces were the *pradeshika*, the *rajuka* and the *yukta*.

◆ Rajukas and yuktas

Megasthenes states that the *rajukas* formed the backbone of the rural administration. They were ordinary Provincial Governors with greater authority. They were granted independence in their administration of law and justice in order. The Mauryan government under Ashoka was imperial in nature i.e directly under the emperor and partly under the Viceroys and Governors. The *yuktas* appear to have been subordinate officials whose duties were largely secretarial work and accounting. The *Yuktas* codified royal orders in the office of the *Mahamatras* or ministers under the instructions of the *Parishad*. The officers like *Yuktas*, *Rajukas* and *Pradesikas* were included in the system of tours prevailing in the Mauryan Empire.

There was an intermediate level of administration between the district level and that of the village. This unit was formed by a group of five or ten villages. The two important officials concerned with the administration of this unit were the *gopa* and the *sthanika*.

- ◆ *Gopa* worked as an accountant for the unit. His duties included the setting up of village boundaries, keeping a census of the population of each village according to their tax-paying capacity,

◆ Administration between district and village level

their professions and their age, noting the live-stock of each village, etc. The tax was collected by the *Sthanika* who worked directly under the *Pradesika*.

- ◆ Village (*Gram*) was the smallest unit of administration and enjoyed autonomy to a great extent. Individual villages had their own set of officials who were directly responsible to the *gopas*.
- ◆ The head of the village was called *Gramika* who was assisted by *Gram-Viddhas* or village elders. *Gramika* was not a paid servant; he was chosen from among the village elders. He may have supervised the tax collection of the village and other matters such as discipline and defence.

The Mauryan administration was well organised with a regular civil service System. The civil servants assisted the Viceroys and Provincial Chiefs. They were called *Purushas*. They were distinguished as being of high, low or middle rank. They are differentiated from the *Rajukas* as a separate body of officers. They were acquainted with the wishes of the King and were exhorting the *Rajukas* into loyal service of the King. Sometimes *Purushas* performed as secret agents of Government. The subordinate rank of civil servants were called *Yuktas*.

◆ Civil service system

◆ Head of Departments

The Head of Departments were called *Mukhas* and known by the general title of *Mahamatras*. *Dhamma Mahamatras* was in charge of the Department of Morals. The *Stri-adhyaksha-Mahamatras* were in charge of the affairs of women. The *Anta-mahamatras* were in charge of the frontiers. The *mahamatra-Nagaraka* was in charge of cities. The *Mahamatras* were also deputed abroad to work as king's *dutas* or ambassadors.

◆ Public works

Apart from all these, there were some officers to look after the public works of the empire. They were mentioned in Ashoka's edicts. The *Vraja* was in charge of the *Vraja-bhumika* (Public parks). There were officers who were also in charge of the wells, traveller's rest houses and public roads. *Hastyadhyaksha* was in charge of the forest elephants.

◆ Frontier Administration

The paternal principle of government was emphasised in dealing with frontier problems. *Anta -mahamatras* were in charge of frontiers. Their main duty was to impose the transit dues on imported goods and after examination of their quality to stamp them with their seals and pass them onto the Superintendent of Tolls. They also controlled thefts committed within their jurisdiction.



“The king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror’s territory is termed the enemy. The king who is likewise situated close to the enemy, but separated from the conqueror only by the enemy, is termed the friend of the conqueror”.

◆ *Relation with neighbouring powers*

A neighbouring power would be the first to dispute control of territory, and therefore Kautilya finds neighbouring kings to be natural enemies of any conqueror. A king whose territories border those of the enemy would also have this relationship with them and therefore be a natural ally. This system of relationships was termed *Rajamandala* (meaning circle of kings). The Mauryas maintained friendly relations with their immediate neighbours for the majority of the empire’s existence. After the Seleucid war, Chandragupta maintained cordial relations with his Greek neighbours and that policy continued through the reign of Bindusara and Ashoka. This led to cultural exchanges between the two cultures which would continue even after the fall of the Mauryas. The Mauryans also established trade and diplomatic links with lands in the east also. These diplomatic relations also involved trade missions, and under Ashoka, missionary expeditions as well. In 251 BCE, Ashoka’s son, Mahinda, led a missionary expedition which introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

◆ *Kalinga war- 9th year of his reign.*

4.1.4 Policy of Dhamma

As mentioned above Ashoka became the third sovereign of the Mauryan dynasty, ascended the throne of Pataliputra and undertook the government of Mauryan Empire. According to mendacious monks Ashoka waded to the throne through bloodshed and he secured his position by the massacre of ninety-nine brothers. There was no record that had survived regarding the events of the first eight years of Ashoka’s reign. In his ninth year, Ashoka undertook the conquest of the Kingdom of Kalinga. The extensive territories of Kalinga were incorporated with his empire.

◆ *Buddhist chronicles*

The Buddhist Chronicles like *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa* mentions that Ashoka turned to Buddha’s *Dhamma* when his nephew Nigrodha, who had become a monk at the age of 7, preached the doctrine to him. At the time of Ashoka’s accession to the throne he was not an avowed Buddhist and it was after some years, his interest in Buddhism grew. During his initial days, he did not get enough support from the older or more orthodox elements at the court. He extended his

open support to Buddhism and certain other sects such as the Ajivikas. Later he saw the practical advantage of adopting the idea of the *Dhamma*.

Meaning of Ashoka's *Dhamma*

◆ General code of ethics

Ashoka defined *Dhamma* as “the general code of ethics and rules of behaviour”. Ashoka's *Dhamma* are certainly familiar to Buddhist teachings and it occurs in Buddhist scripture. Ashoka *Dhamma* provides an ideology of persuasive assimilation. It was his personal conviction of Buddhist teaching. In the Aramaic and Greek inscriptions the word *Dhamma* is translated as “good conduct” in one sense and as “pious conduct” in the other. In his edicts, Ashoka defines the main principles of *Dhamma* as non-violence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience to parents, respects to brahmins and other religious teachers and priests, liberality towards friends, humane treatment of servants and generosity towards all.

Virtues of *Dhamma*

The Major Rock Edicts and the Pillar Edicts provide details with a picture of what Ashoka meant by *Dhamma*. He describes *Dhamma* as an awareness of the sins of cruelty, harshness, anger, pride and envy. He mentions the behaviour required of those who observe the *Dhamma*. This consists of

◆ Ashoka's idea of *Dhamma*

1. obedience to parents, elders and teachers
2. concern for friends and relatives,
3. gifts to Brahmins and sramanas
4. abstention from killing
5. good treatment towards slaves, servants and the poor
6. moderation in attachment to possessions

Ashoka's idea of *Dhamma* gave emphasis to tolerance to all sects. He states that his concern for tolerance arises with the welfare of the whole world. The ultimate purpose of *dhamma* is the attainment of heaven. But it is curious that there is repeated reference to heaven but no reference to Nirvana. Ashoka argues that the purpose of the edicts is to elevate people through observance of *Dhamma*. He appointed officers called the *Dhamma- mahamatras* to explain *dhamma* to the people. Ashoka denounces any interest in fame and glory



◆ Duties and privileges of Dhamma mahamatras

through the propagation of *Dhamma*. In the twenty-seventh regnal year he issued the first pillar edict. The First pillar Edict states that his principle is to protect through *dhamma*, to administer affairs according to *dhamma*, to please the people with *Dhamma*, to guard the empire with *dhamma*.

Dhamma Mahamatras

Ashoka appointed special officers named *Dhamma Mahamatras*. The rock and Pillar edicts also mention this new category of officers. *Dhamma Mahamattas* or officers of *Dhamma* supervised the execution of his precepts. Their functions were linked to the welfare of his subjects and were directed to use their best endeavours to secure the happiness of all classes of the population. They were in part concerned with the weaker sections of the society especially the aged, women and children. They were also sent to neighbouring Hellenistic Kingdoms of West Asia for the propagation of *Dhamma*. They were also required to attend to the welfare of various religious sects especially Brahmins, Ajivikas and Nirgrantha. *Dhamma Mahamatras* also enjoyed special privileges and they were aware of their role in propagating *Dhamma*. The *Dhamma Mahamatras* were instructed to look to the welfare of all sects. They were also expected to explain *dhamma* to the various people in whose welfare and happiness they are working.

◆ Major Rock Edict VIII and XIII

1. They were ordered to watch over the interests of the poor and aged.
2. They prevented the infliction of wrongful imprisonment
3. They also granted remissions of sentence in special cases(sudden Calamity)

4.1.5 Ashoka and Buddhism

In his Major Rock Edict XIII records, Ashoka mentions that after the Kalinga war, he came very close to the practice and teachings of *Dhamma*. In the Minor Rock Edict issued in his thirteenth regnal year, he states that he was drawn closer to the *Sangha* and have become more ardent. In Major Rock Edict VIII, he states that he went to the Bodhi tree, the Buddha's tree of enlightenment and that his conversion to Buddhism was not a sudden one but rather a gradual and increasingly closer one.

◆ Third Buddhist Council

◆ *Donated caves to the Ajivikas*

The Third Buddhist council was held at Pataliputra. In this council, the doctrine was clarified and Theravada position was established as the correct doctrine. This is considered as the most significant Buddhist council because of its mutual legitimation of the emperor and the sangha. One of the significant outcomes of the council is missionary activity. The council decided to send missions not only within the subcontinent but also to the north-west region and Sri Lanka. It has been argued that the Schism Edict was issued at three major monastic centres at Kosambi, Sanchi and Sarnath after the third Buddhist Council.

◆ *Transformation of Buddhism under Ashoka*

During the thirteenth and twentieth year of his reign, Ashoka donated caves to the Ajivikas even though there was hostility between them and the Buddhists. This shows that as a royal patron he rises above sectarian rivalries of his period. These donations were made when at the same time he was travelling to places sacred to Buddhism. The Rummindei Pillar Inscription records state that Ashoka made pilgrimages to Lumbini, the sacred place of Buddhism. Similarly the Nigalisagar Pillar Inscription record states that he made initiatives for the enlargement of the stupa of Konakamana and made pilgrimage to this site.

◆ *Law of piety*

Ashoka adopted a practical moral code of Buddhism or law of piety not only within his own vast dominions but also Ceylon (present Sri Lanka) in a well-considered scheme of missionary effort. The missionaries were dispatched to Ceylon and independent kingdoms in the south of the peninsula, Mysore and the Bombay coast, Mahratta Country, Mountains of the Himalayas, Kashmir and Pegu. These Buddhist missions laid the foundations of the Buddhist faith in all these countries. The transformation of Buddhism from a regional sect into a world religion is credited to Ashoka alone. Ashoka is also credited with planting fruit-bearing trees for shade, digging wells and erection of rest-houses and watering places at convenient intervals along the high roads within his dominions. He devoted special attention to the cultivation of and dissemination of medical herbs.

In the thirteenth year of his reign, Ashoka insisted all local governors hold assemblies in which the law of piety should be preached, expounded and discussed. All the officials of the subordinate rank were bound to attend these assemblies. These assemblies were convened quinquennially. But at Taxila in the Punjab and at Ujjain in Central India, such



- ◆ Patrons of heterodox sects like Jainas, Ajivikas and Buddhists

assemblies were held once every three years. Ashoka defines his understanding of *Dhamma* in his Major Rock Edicts and the Pillar Edicts. In his edicts, he was clearly identifying himself as the ruler of an empire and speaking for his subjects.

- ◆ Propagation of Buddhist doctrine

The Mauryan rulers were patrons of heterodox sects such as the Jainas, Ajivikas and Buddhists. The Jaina tradition associates Chandragupta Maurya and Bindusara, the father of Ashoka associated with the Ajivika Sect. The main sources that show Ashoka's connection with Buddhism are Buddhist texts and in his inscriptions. Buddhist sources consider him as a devout *upasaka* as he had close connections with the leading monks of his time such as Upagupta. Ashoka was also a patron of the *Sangha* and an ardent follower of the Buddhist teachings. It is reflected in many legends. He also played an important role in building Buddhist establishments in many parts of the subcontinent. He has built 84000 stupas and viharas.

- ◆ Ashoka's policy of toleration

In Minor Rock Edict I, Ashoka states that he has been a lay follower of Buddhism. Minor Rock Edict III (Bairat Inscription), he greets the *Sangha*. The Schism edict presents Ashoka's close relationship with the *Sangha*. The Buddhist texts tell us that Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism was a sudden and transformative event. It also mentions that Ashoka was a vile and evil man until he came under the influence of Buddhism. In his edicts, he adopted the title *Priyadarsin* (*Priyadasi*) meaning humane. In the ninth year of his reign, he joined the Buddhist community as a lay disciple. In the eleventh year of his reign his interest in Buddhist teaching was more stimulated. He devoted his life and all the resources of his imperial power to the propagation and promulgation of Buddhist doctrine. By adopting Buddhism, the Emperor Ashoka himself opened the gate of heaven, happiness and welfare of mankind here and hereafter. Chinese pilgrim I-tsing pointed out that the statues of Ashoka represent him as wearing a monk's robe of a particular pattern. This shows he had joined the Buddhist order.

Ashoka's pilgrimage to the holy places of Buddhism, his various measures for protecting animal life, and his abolition of meat diet for the royal household were mentioned in his edicts. He abolished the slaughter of animals and abolished bloody sacrifices. His observance of the *Upasatha* Buddhist

◆ *Morality as his governing principle*

holidays also shows stages in his progress towards Buddhism. Ashoka was attached to a definite Buddhist symbol of the White Elephant. Prior to conversion to Buddhism, he freely allowed the slaughter of animals in the royal kitchen every day. He did not become an absolute vegetarian even after his conversion. His diet included the flesh of antelopes and peacocks even after six years of his conversion. Ashoka followed a policy of toleration as permitted by his zeal for Buddhism. His edicts mentioned his liberality to Brahmins and Sramanas. He also openly expresses his disapprobation of the performance of certain rites and ceremonies, which was an essential feature of Brahmanical religion. He also granted cave-dwellings to the Ajivikas.

Ashoka tried to install morality as his governing principle. His new ideals expressed in a new language and a variety of terms invented by him to indicate his new measures. They are

1. *Dhamma-mahamatra*
2. *Dhamma-yatra*
3. *Dhamma-lipi* (as distinguished from the secular royal messages)
4. *Dhamma-niyama* (the restrictions dictated by morality)
5. *Dhamma Sravana*
6. *Dhamma-ghosha* (religious proclamations as distinguished from military proclamations)
7. *Dhamma-stambha* (pillars of piety as distinguished from the usual pillars of military victory)
8. *Dhamma-sambandha*
9. *Dhamma-samstava*
10. *Dhamma-samvibhaga*
11. *Dhamma-nugraha*
12. *Dhamma-dana*
13. *Dhamma-mangala*
14. *Dhamma-vijaya*

◆ *Ashoka built buddhist monasteries to propagate Dhamma*

As mentioned above, Ashoka was also known as a great builder of cities, stupas, *viharas* or monasteries and pillars. He laid the foundation to two cities namely Srinagara, the capital

◆ Propagation of Buddhism

of Kashmir and the second was in Nepal. In Srinagara he built 500 Buddhist monasteries together with other edifices. He built the city of *Deo-patan* (*Deva-pattana*) in commemoration of the royal visit. Ashoka built a monastery by himself at Pataliputra. He was also a great builder of monolithic pillars. *Dhamma* (or the Sanskrit counterpart, *Dharma*) should not be translated as religion because it was not any one specific religious belief or practice. Furthermore, it wasn't a royal policy that was developed at random. *Dhamma* was very broadly tied to social behaviour and activity standards, and Ashoka made a very rigorous synthesis of the many norms that were in use at the time in his *Dhamma*.

Spread of Buddhism

◆ Buddhism became established religion

The Buddhist literary sources considered Ashoka to have been the ideal Buddhist ruler extending his generous and devout patronage to Buddhism in every possible way. During the period of Ashoka, the propagation of Buddhism through the order of monks and nuns was widespread. Ashoka's initiative in both internal and foreign missionary endeavours after the third Buddhist council needs special mention. The Srilankan Pali sources also provide information on these missions. The *bhikkhus* had a prominent role in the propagation and they preached the law during the cold and the hot seasons. Ashoka used the state machinery of *Rajukas* and *Mahamatras*. He also replaced the call of drums for military services with *Dhamma*. Ashoka began inscribing his messages on rocks twelve years after coronation.

Ashoka helped establish Buddhism in various parts of the subcontinent and in the neighbouring areas, even though royal patronage has its limitations. During the post Mauryan period, both Buddhism and Jainism were evident in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In northwestern India and western and eastern Deccan, Buddhism rapidly became the established religion. The merchant class dedicated their support to the embellishment of the Buddhist sacred centres.

4.1.6 Mode of Production and Economic Diversification

The Mauryas established a well-organized state apparatus that functioned at the centre of the empire for the first time. Additionally, their victory paved the way for missionary and commercial activities. The expansion of the Gangetic basin's material culture to regions on the outside of the

◆ Development of new material culture

empire appears to have been facilitated by interactions made by officials, traders, and Jaina and Buddhist monks. The introduction of burnt bricks and ring wells, as well as the extensive use of iron, writing, punch-marked coins, an abundance of beautiful pottery known as Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), and most importantly, the existence of towns in northeastern India, all contributed to the development of the new material culture in the Gangetic basin. Arrian, a Greek author, asserts that due to their multiplicity, it is impossible to accurately count the number of cities. As a result, the Gangetic plains experienced a fast growth of material culture throughout the Maurya period. People used this metal more and more as a result of easy access to the abundant iron ores in south Bihar. Axes, hoes, spades, sickles, and ploughshares with sockets may be found from this time period. Along with these iron tools, spoked wheels also started to be used. Although the Maurya state had exclusive control over guns and weapons, anybody may utilize other iron tools. From the Gangetic basin to far-flung areas of the empire, their use and production must have expanded.

4.1.6.1 Features of Agrarian Society

◆ Land tax

The *Arthashastra* accepted the establishment of permanent communities as a strategy for boosting the agrarian economy. These settlements provided the State with a solid and stable resource basis from which to collect taxes, the majority of which came from the land tax. The entirety of how this settlement procedure was carried out is unclear, however it was known by the name of janapadanivesa. According to R.S. Sharma, it is safe to assume that this method was used to cultivate the majority of the Ganges Basin, and that some efforts may have been made in the outlying areas as well. The expansion of agriculture led to the cultivator's function becoming more and more significant. The farmers are listed as the second class by Megasthenes in his description of Indian society and its separation into seven classes, just after the philosophers who are stated as the first class, and before the warriors who are named as the third class. The cultivators were not armed, according to the classical accounts. The peasants, according to Megasthenes, were not affected by the conflict.

Some of the lands were crown or sita lands. The rights of possession, cultivation, mortgage, and sale in these lands naturally belonged to the King and the State. In fact,



- ◆ Crown land known as *Sita* land
- ◆ Slaves worked directly under state control

the *Arthashastra* mentions a *sitadhyaksha*, or supervisor of agriculture, who likely oversaw the farming activities in this location. These regions were likely fertile and well-suited for high productivity. It is challenging to identify the source of these State farms. It's conceivable that their beginnings were in pre-Mauryan huge estates that were owned by certain proprietors. Additionally, slaves resided in these areas and worked directly under state control. *Arthashastra* also mentioned about these advanced knowledge of agricultural techniques.

- ◆ Individual cultivation in *Janapadas*
- ◆ Facility of irrigation

Other regions of the Mauryan State, such as *Janapadas*, may have private agricultural operations. The *gahapatis* and *grambhojakas*, who are claimed to have hired labour on land, are frequently mentioned in the Jataka tales, demonstrating their ability to do so as members of the land-owning elite. However, the labourers are shown as being in a pitiful condition, and occasionally slaves are also referenced. In both the *sita* and *janapada* regions, the King might be an individual landowner, however there aren't many records from this time period that specifically mention this. There were several cultivation methods and stages of agricultural development. The allusions in the *Arthashastra* to various agricultural endeavours managed by officials thus pertain to land owned by either the State or the King. Facility of agriculture was provided in the state owned land. Officers were appointed to check the sluices that dispersed water into the branch channels and measure the area of the land. The reference of an irrigation access equivalent to a fifth, a fourth, or a third of the product in the *Arthashastra* indicates that irrigation facilities existed in other locations as well.

Land Revenue

- ◆ Villages provided soldiers were exempted from tax

There is reference that the villages which provided soldiers to the state were exempted from tax. The main source of revenue was from land. Therefore, it was necessary to coordinate the land revenue collection effectively in order to expropriate the greatest amount of excess from the populace. According to popular consensus, the Mauryan era marked a turning point in the development of ancient India's taxation system. The *samsharta* was the highest officer in charge of the assessment of land revenue, which the Mauryas actually gave a considerable deal of importance. The State's treasury was under the supervision of the *sannidhata*. Since the revenue was also received in kind, it was also the latter's responsibility to provide storage facilities.

- ◆ 1/4th of the produce as tax

The writers mention that 1/4th of the produce was paid in tax by the peasants and tribute was paid by them. The major source of income was the land tax (*bhaga*). The scriptures state that it was assessed at a rate equal to 1/6th of the product. However, it's conceivable that it was fairly high and assessed as 1/4th of the production during the Maurya era. According to the Lumbini Edict of Ashoka, he absolved the hamlet of paying the bali tax and decreased the *bhaga* tax to 1/8 when he visited Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace. Another method the State used to gather agricultural resources was sharecropping. The sharecroppers were first given seeds, oxen, etc., as well as fertile land for farming. In this situation, the peasants likely donated half of their harvest to the government.

- ◆ *Pindakara*, *hiranya*, *bali*, *pranaya* - various types of taxes

The peasants also had to pay a significant amount of customary dues in addition to the aforementioned taxes. Additionally, the Mauryas enacted new levies and improved the efficiency of others. *Pindakara*, a tax imposed on groups of villages, was paid by husband's men and was paid by the peasants. Additionally, it was conventional in nature. Villages frequently had to furnish food to the royal army that was travelling through their various regions, which inevitably added to their load. The precise nature of *hiranya* is likewise unknown, although given that the word literally translates to "gold," it was undoubtedly a levy paid in cash. All of the aforementioned taxes, including *Bali*, the well-known Vedic charge that was maintained by the Mauryas, are detailed by Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. *Pranaya*, a voluntary gift was also levied by the state at times of emergency.

- ◆ Tax collection

The *Arthashastra* takes great care while creating the State's revenue structure since land revenue served as the cornerstone of the Mauryan economy. Due to the fact that soil fertility differed from location to location, it is specific in designating the various sorts of villages to be taxed. Special categories of tax collectors and assessors are also given attention. Therefore, it is obvious that the Mauryan State, at least in its important regions, had to assure a sizable land tax collection since otherwise it would have been impossible to support the administrative apparatus and the army.

The Mauryan empire was characterised by a flourishing internal and external trade system, The economy was agrarian with the majority of the population depending on conventional agriculture for not only sustenance but also as a livelihood. Trade and commerce flourished with



◆ *Internal and external trade*

well-protected trade routes, merchants' guilds and an efficient and standardised set of weights, measures and rates of exchange set across the empire. Complex economic transactions necessitated the need for money as a means of exchange. The currency came in the form of punch-marked coins mainly of silver and copper. The first was the silver *pana* and its submultiples, followed by the copper *mashaka* and its submultiples. The *Arthashastra* also mentions *kakani*, a copper currency that was not as widely used as *pana* and *mashaka*. These coins contain no name of any Maurya monarch and are imprinted with diverse motifs like the Sun, a tree in a fence, the moon, animals, and so on.

4.1.7 Decline of the Mauryas

◆ *Weak succession and internal conflicts*

The Mauryan empire began to disintegrate after the death of Ashoka in 232 BCE. There were several causes that led to the decline and fall of the Mauryan Empire. The Maurya Empire suffered from weak succession and internal power struggles after the death of Emperor Ashoka. The lack of a clear and strong ruler led to infighting among factions vying for power. This weakened the empire's central authority and resulted in regional rebellions, as different regions sought independence or aligned with rival powers. The absence of stable leadership and the fragmentation of power undermined the empire's ability to maintain control and effectively govern its vast territories.

◆ *Economic drain and administrative difficulties*

The expansion and administration of the Maurya Empire placed a tremendous economic burden on the ruling elite. The construction of infrastructure, maintenance of a large standing army, and running a bureaucratic administration required substantial resources. To fund these endeavors, the rulers resorted to heavy taxation, which burdened the populace and led to discontent. The excessive taxation, combined with corruption and mismanagement in the administration, eroded public support for the empire and contributed to its decline.

◆ *Religious and social movements*

During the decline of Mauryan Empire there was a significant shift in religious and social dynamics. The rise of heterodox sects, such as Buddhism and Jainism, challenged the dominant Brahmanical religion and the authority of the ruling elite. These new religious movements preached non-violence and egalitarian ideals, which resonated with the oppressed masses. Emperor Ashoka issued his edicts in Prakrit and not in Sanskrit. He asked the people to respect

even the Brahmanas and prohibited animal killing. The anti-sacrifice attitude of Ashoka also affected the income of Brahmanas. He also appointed *Rajukas* and introduced *Vyavahara samantha* and *Dandasamantha*. By introducing this he meant implementing the same civil and criminal laws for all *varnas*. Consequently, support for the Mauryan rulers waned, and the empire faced challenges from within, as people turned to alternative sources of spiritual and social guidance.

◆ *External
Invasions
and Military
Weakness*

The Maurya Empire faced external threats from regional powers and invasions on its frontiers. The northwestern region, in particular, was vulnerable to attacks from the Greeks, Bactrians, and Scythians. Over time, the empire's military strength waned due to a combination of factors. The high cost of maintaining a large standing army strained the empire's resources, while complacency and a decline in martial spirit among rulers and soldiers diminished their effectiveness in defending against invasions. These external pressures and military weaknesses further contributed to the empire's decline.

◆ *Economic
and Trade
Disruptions*

The decline of the Maurya Empire coincided with disruptions in economic and trade networks. Maritime trade routes, which had facilitated the empire's prosperity, experienced decline due to various factors such as changing trade patterns, the rise of competing trade routes, and political instability. The breakdown of law and order in some regions hindered the movement of goods and disrupted economic activities. The resulting decline in revenue and wealth undermined the empire's economic stability, weakened its influence, and contributed to its ultimate decline.

Summarised Overview

The Mauryan Empire, which existed from 322 BCE to 185 BCE, was one of the most significant and prosperous empires in ancient India. It was founded by Chandragupta Maurya and reached its zenith under the reign of Emperor Ashoka. The empire spanned across a vast territory, including present-day India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and parts of Iran and Bangladesh. The administration of the Mauryan Empire was highly organized and efficient. It was divided into provinces, which were further subdivided into districts and villages. The central authority of the empire was maintained through a bureaucratic system, with officials responsible for taxation, law enforcement, and administration. The capital city of Pataliputra (modern-day Patna) served as the political and administrative center of the empire.



Emperor Ashoka, who ruled from 268 BCE to 232 BCE, played a crucial role in shaping the empire and implementing policies that had a lasting impact on Indian history. Initially, Ashoka followed a policy of expansion and military conquest, leading successful campaigns to expand the empire's borders. However, after witnessing the brutal consequences of the Kalinga War, Ashoka underwent a profound transformation and embraced the principles of Buddhism. Ashoka's policy of *Dhamma*, was a central aspect of his rule. *Dhamma* was not limited to religious doctrine but encompassed a broader set of moral and ethical principles aimed at promoting social harmony, justice, and compassion. Ashoka's edicts were inscribed on pillars and rocks throughout the empire, spreading his message to the masses.

Under Ashoka's *Dhamma* policy, efforts were made to ensure the welfare and well-being of the people. Ashoka implemented measures to improve the administration and justice system, promoting equity and fairness. He encouraged tolerance and respect for all religions, providing patronage to various religious and spiritual traditions. He also advocated for the protection of wildlife and the environment, establishing sanctuaries and regulating hunting practices. To spread the message of *Dhamma*, Ashoka sent emissaries and missionaries to neighboring regions and distant lands, including Sri Lanka and even Greece. These missions aimed to propagate Buddhist principles and foster cultural exchanges. Ashoka's efforts played a significant role in the spread of Buddhism beyond India's borders.

The administration of the Mauryan Empire during Ashoka's rule reflected the principles of *Dhamma*. Ashoka appointed officials known as *Dhamma Mahamatras* who were responsible for implementing the policy and ensuring its adherence throughout the empire. These officials were tasked with resolving disputes, promoting ethical conduct, and overseeing social welfare programs. The emphasis on morality and ethical behavior in governance was a unique feature of the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka.

However, while Ashoka's policies were well-intentioned, the empire faced challenges during its later years. Weak succession, internal conflicts, economic strains, and external invasions all contributed to the decline of the Mauryan Empire. After Ashoka's death, the empire gradually disintegrated, eventually succumbing to regional fragmentation and the rise of new powers.

Self Assessment

1. What is the meaning of *Dhamma*?
2. How did the Mauryan Empire reach its peak?
3. Mention the relation of Ashoka with his neighbouring rulers.

4. Discuss the provincial administration of the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka.
5. Define Ashoka's policy of *Dhamma*.
6. Write a short note on the centralised administration system of the Mauryan Empire.
7. What was the role of *Rajukas* in the provincial administration of the Mauryan Empire?
8. Explain the expansion and consolidation of the Mauryan Empire under Chandragupta Maurya.
9. Write a short note on the *Dhamma Mahamatras*?
10. What were the causes that led to the decline of the Mauryan Empire?

Assignments

1. Discuss the impact of Emperor Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism on the Mauryan Empire and its governance.
2. Compare and contrast the political and administrative systems of the Mauryan Empire with those of contemporary empires.
3. Discuss the reforms introduced by the Mauryan rulers and their impact on governance and stability.
4. Bring out the reasons for the decline of Mauryan Empire.

Suggested Readings

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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.





Gupta and Post Gupta periods

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ◆ gain an understanding of the establishment of Central Asian contact in the Indian subcontinent
- ◆ explore the expansion and consolidation of the Gupta empire
- ◆ acquire knowledge about the discussion around the concept of Indian Feudalism during this period
- ◆ be made aware of the 'Golden Age theory
- ◆ be familiarised with the emergence of minor principalities during the post-Gupta period

Background

In the previous unit, we discussed the consolidation of the Mauryan empire over a significant portion of the Indian subcontinent and beyond and its eventual decline. Afterwards, the subcontinent underwent several political and cultural transformations due to a series of disturbances from Central Asia. The cultural interactions with Central Asia and the integration of its diversity into Indian civilization gave this period its historical relevance. Several innovations also happened in trade, technology, the arts, and religion. The Gupta Empire emerged in the early 4th century CE, during a period when India lacked any large state structure. Even though Kushans in the North and the Satavahanas in the Deccan held power, their influence had also weakened over time as minor powers and new ruling families began to emerge. The exact origins of the Gupta lineage are unclear. This unit deals with the establishment of the Gupta Empire and the political condition during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods.

Keywords

Golden Age, Indian Feudalism, Eulogy, *Prashasti*, Culture, Art, Architecture



Discussion

4.2.1 Central Asian Contacts

- ◆ *Emergence of political powers during the Post-Mauryan period*

The period between the disintegration of the Mauryas and the emergence of the Guptas, i.e., around 500 years, several powers dominated the political landscape of north India. This period was known for its contact with Central Asia. The north-western part of India had historical interaction with Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Various nomadic tribes, such as Scythians, Sakas, Huns, and Turks, migrated from the Steppes in search of new pasture lands. One of the significant aspects of this period was the rise of the Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Parthians, and Kushans, who invaded India from Central Asia through the northwestern frontier. Among them, the Kushans were the most important. The establishment of the Kushan state significantly accelerated interstate commerce. Assimilative and syncretic tendencies emerged and gained strength in the social and cultural sphere. The Sungas, the Kanvas and the Satavahanas were the native successors of the Mauryas.

- ◆ *The Indo- Greeks*

The Indo-Greeks emerged through a series of invasions around 200 BCE. The Greeks who ruled Bactria (Balkh) in northern Afghanistan, were the first to cross the Hindu Kush. Weakness in the Seleucid empire and pressure from Scythian tribes prompted Greek rulers to invade India. The Indo-Greeks, also known as Indo-Bactrians, occupied a significant portion of northwestern India, surpassing Alexander's conquests. Menander, a famous Indo-Greek ruler, had his capital in Sakala (Sialkot) and expanded his territory to the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. He was a patron of Buddhism and engaged in philosophical discussions with Nagasena, a Buddhist sage, resulting in the book *Milinda Panho* or "Questions of Milinda." The Indo-Greek rule in India is notable for their coinage, which can be attributed to specific kings, unlike early punch-marked coins. They were the first to mint gold coins in India, with the tradition continuing under the Kushans. Greek influence introduced Hellenistic art to northwestern India, exemplified by Gandhara art, a fusion of Greek and non-Greek elements.

The Sakas, also known as the Scythians, succeeded the Greeks and exerted control over a larger part of India than their predecessors. Divided into five branches, the Sakas



◆ *The Sakas*

established their power in different regions of India and Afghanistan. One branch settled in Afghanistan, another in Punjab with Taxila as their capital, a third in Mathura for about two centuries, a fourth in western India until the fourth century, and a fifth in the upper Deccan. The Sakas faced little resistance from Indian rulers, except for a king of Ujjain, who called himself as Vikramaditya. He expelled the Sakas in 57-58 BCE. Vikramaditya is known to have started the Vikrama Samvat era and inspired subsequent Indian kings to adopt the title. They benefited from the sea-borne trade in Gujarat and issued numerous silver coins. Rudradaman I (130-50 CE) was a renowned Saka ruler who ruled regions including Sindh, Gujarat, Konkan, the Narmada Valley, Malwa, and Kathiawar. He issued the first extensive inscription in pure Sanskrit, despite his Central Asian lineage.

◆ *The Parthians*

The period of Saka dominance in the north-western region of India was succeeded by the ascendance of the Parthians. Numerous ancient Indian Sanskrit texts associate these two groups together, referring to them as Saka-Pahlavas. Originally hailing from Iran, the Parthians, or Pahlavas, migrated to India. However, in the first century CE, their territorial influence in north-western India was relatively limited compared to the Greeks and Sakas. Gondophernes, a renowned Parthian ruler, presided over this era and is associated with the arrival of St. Thomas, who is believed to have travelled to India to propagate Christianity. Over time, akin to the Sakas, the Parthians assimilated into Indian society.

◆ *The Kushans*

The Kushans, also known as the Yuechis or Tocharians, succeeded the Parthians. Originating from north Central Asia, they migrated to Bactria (present-day northern Afghanistan) and gradually expanded their rule to the Kabul Valley, Gandhara, and the lower Indus basin. Their empire spanned from the Oxus River to the Ganges, including parts of Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northern India. The Kushans brought together various cultures and peoples, fostering a unique cultural amalgamation across nine modern countries. The Kushans witnessed two dynasties - the first was led by the Kadphises lineage, who were known for minting coins imitating Roman currency. The second, under the Kanishka dynasty, saw the expansion of Kushan influence in northern India and the lower Indus basin. Evidence from Kushan coins, inscriptions, architectural constructions, and sculptures discovered in Mathura indicates that the city

served as their secondary capital in India. The first capital was Purushapura or Peshawar, where Kanishka erected a monastery and an immense stupa. Kanishka started the Saka era in 78 CE and is renowned for his patronage of Buddhism, hosting a Buddhist council in Kashmir. Kushan authority persisted in areas like the Kabul Valley, Kapisa, Bactria, Khorezm, and Sogdiana until the mid-third century. Numerous Kushan artefacts have been discovered, including coins, inscriptions, and a grand palace at Toprak-Kala in Khorezm, showcasing their administrative archive. Eventually, the Sassanian power from Iran supplanted the Kushans in Afghanistan and the western Indus region.

♦ *Native successors of Mauryas - the Sungas, the Kanvas and the Satavahanas*

The most important of the native successors of the Mauryas in the north were the Sungas, followed by the Kanvas. The Satavahanas emerged in the Deccan and central India after a gap of approximately 100 years. With advancements such as iron tools, urbanization, and writing, the Satavahanas laid the foundation for state formation. While the Puranas only mention Andhra rule, not Satavahana rule. According to some Puranas, the Andhras ruled altogether for 300 years although this period is assigned to the rule of the Satavahana dynasty. The earliest inscriptions of the Satavahanas date back to the 1st century BCE, marking their conquest of the Kanvas and their establishment in parts of central India. Initially, their power was centred in north Maharashtra, where their earliest coins and inscriptions were discovered. Gradually, they expanded their influence to Karnataka and Andhra. The Sakas posed a significant challenge and at one stage, the Satavahanas were displaced from Maharashtra and western India. Gautamiputra Satakarni restored their fortunes by defeating the Sakas, including Nahapana, and claiming territories like Malwa and Kathiawar. The successors of Gautamiputra ruled until 220 CE. The inscriptions of Vashishthiputra Pulumayi found in Andhra suggest its integration into the Satavahana kingdom. The Sakas continued their conflicts for the possession of Konkan coast and Malwa. But, Yajna Sri Satakarni, the last Satavahana ruler, reclaimed territories and also supported trade and navigation. However, the Satavahana kingdom ultimately fell by 220 CE.

4.2.1.1 Impact of the Central Asian Contact

During the post-Maurya period, Indian religions underwent significant changes, influenced by increased trade, artisanal activities, and the influx of people from



◆ *Spread of Buddhism*

Central Asia. Buddhism was particularly impacted, with monks and nuns relying on cash donations from traders and artisans in towns. Monastic areas, such as Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, reveal a high concentration of coins. Buddhism also embraced non-vegetarian foreigners, leading to a relaxation of the austere lifestyle of monks. They began accepting gold and silver, consuming non-vegetarian food, and wearing elaborate robes. Some even left the monastic order altogether. This new form of Buddhism became known as Mahayana or the Great Vehicle, contrasting with the old form of Buddhism, called Hinayana or the Lesser Vehicle. Symbolic worship of objects associated with the Buddha gave way to the worship of Buddha images. Kanishka, a significant patron, organized a council in Kashmir where Buddhist literature was thoroughly explained. Commentaries were engraved on copper sheets and placed in a stupa, potentially shedding light on Buddhist texts. Kanishka also constructed numerous stupas to honour the memory of Buddha.

◆ *Emergence of Gandhara and Mathura art*

The Kushan Empire brought together skilled masons and artisans from different schools and regions, giving rise to distinct art schools: Central Asian, Gandhara, and Mathura. Central Asian sculptures reveal a synthesis of local and Indian elements influenced by Buddhism. Indian craftsmen interacted with Central Asians, Greeks, and Romans, particularly in Gandhara along northwestern frontier of India. This interaction gave birth to a new artistic style featuring Buddha images fashioned in the Greco-Roman manner with corresponding hairstyles. The influence of Gandhara art extended to Mathura, known for its indigenous art. Mathura produced exquisite Buddha images and the notable headless erect statue of Kanishka, inscribed with his name. The region also crafted stone images of Vardhamana Mahavira. Despite Mathura's association with birthplace of Krishna, its pre-Gupta sculptures and inscriptions lack emphasis on Krishna. The red sandstone products belonging to Mathura art was even discovered beyond Mathura. The Mathura Museum has the largest collection of Kushan sculptures in India. In southern regions, remarkable artistic achievements occurred. Maharashtra witnessed the construction of stunning Buddhist caves. Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh became renowned centres of Buddhist art, featuring panels depicting stories of Buddha. Early Buddhist panels can be found in Bodhi-Gaya, Sanchi, and Bharhut, dating back to the 2nd century BCE.

◆ *Advancement in architecture and trade*

One of the notable aspects of the Saka- Kushana era was the advancement of architecture. They used burnt bricks for flooring and tiles for the flooring and roofing. Redware pottery, which is characterised by its fine fabric and plain or polished appearance, indicates the influence of Central Asian pottery techniques. It was well-known even in areas like Farghana, which was outside the Kushan cultural zone. During the Kushana rule, Central Asia and India experienced political stability as well as improved trade and cultural interaction. The Kushans controlled the Silk Route, which was an important trade route linking Asia and the Mediterranean. Moreover, the Sakas and the Kushans adopted Indian scripts and organised religions, which indicated the assimilation of the local customs. Better cavalry warfare and the use of horses were the contributions of the Central Asians. They also introduced the use of reins, saddles and stirrups.

4.2.2 Emergence of Gupta Empire

◆ *Origin of the Gupta dynasty*

The post-Mauryan period of the Indian subcontinent did not witness a significant central political authority other than the rule of Kushans, who were from Central Asia. The Gupta dynasty was a powerful indigenous dynasty which occupied large swathes of the Indian subcontinent and ruled between c. 300 and 600 CE. The history of the Gupta period is reconstructed through inscriptions and coins. However, these sources hardly provide any information on the origin of the dynasty. *Manu Smriti* and the *Vishnu Purana* hint that Guptas belong to Vaishyas as the term 'Gupta' is related to the Vaishya *varna*. Based on the matrimonial alliance of Guptas with Lichchavis and Nagas, who were considered Kshatriyas, some scholars contend that the Guptas belong to Kshatriya *Varna*. The scholars such as S.R Goyal claim that the Guptas were Brahmanas, based on the alliance of Guptas with Vakatakas and the matrimonial alliance with the Brahmana Kadamba family. Let us now examine the political forces who controlled various regions of the country prior to the arrival of the Guptas.

Before the third century CE, the Sassanians of Iran significantly weakened the power of the Kushans and expanded their rule over Sindh and other regions. However, numismatic evidence hints that some branches of the Kushans continued to rule Afghanistan, Kashmir and western Punjab alongside the early Guptas. The smaller



♦ *Political powers prior to the emergence of Guptas*

territories, mentioned in Gupta records, were controlled by the republican states such as Madrakas, Yaudheyas and Malavas. Meanwhile, Guptas overthrew the Nagas, who held power in Mathura. The Kshatrapas continued to rule Western India till they were overthrown by Chandragupta II of the Gupta dynasty in the fourth century CE. Additionally, the Vakatakas, who emerged as a powerful family in Vidarbha, had matrimonial alliances with the Guptas. After the decline of the Satavahanas, royal families such as Ikshvakus and Salankayanas appeared in coastal Andhra. Meanwhile, the Kadambas grew influential in Karnataka, and the Pallavas ruled Tamil Nadu from the third to the ninth centuries CE. Also, new kingdoms emerged in the areas such as Odisha, Bengal and Madhya Pradesh.

♦ *Early rulers of the Gupta dynasty*

The period from c. 300 to 600 CE is referred to as the Gupta period, in which the north Indian political domain was dominated mainly by the Guptas. Guptas controlled the territories along the Ganga up to Prayag (Allahabad), Saketa and Magadha. Even though Maharaja Gupta and Maharaja Ghatotkacha are considered the first two rulers of the Gupta line, Chandragupta, the third Gupta ruler, was referred to as *Maharajadhiraja* and appeared to have established the empire in 319 CE. His empire covered areas of present Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. His marriage with the Lichchhavi princess, Kumaradevi, was inscribed on the coins. The matrimonial alliance of the Gupta ruler with the Lichchavis reflects the political importance of the latter during that period.

♦ *Samudragupta and Allahabad pillar inscription*

According to epigraphic and numismatic evidence, Samudragupta (c. 350-370 CE) succeeded Chandragupta I. The *prashasti* found on the Allahabad Pillar is considered to be the most important epigraph of his reign. It also reflects the complex political history of the Gupta Empire. The Gupta inscription on the Allahabad pillar was composed by Harishena, who is considered to have occupied a higher rank in the Gupta administration. Harishena eulogises the triumphs and conquests of Samudragupta. There is a reference in the *prashastis* to the tributes paid by the frontier rulers such as Kamarupa, Nepala, Samatata, Davaka, and Kartripura to the ruler. Samudragupta is also known for his intellectual and musical skills and his military and political achievements. He is called '*Kaviraja*', i.e. king among poets, and his coins portrayed him as playing the lyre by sitting on a couch. Samudragupta's coins also depict his *Aswamedha* sacrifice.

◆ Expansion of the Gupta Empire under Samudragupta

There is a reference in the *prashastis* that Samudragupta annexed the territories, including those of the *Aryavrata* kings, and reduced them to subordinates of the Gupta empire. Hence, the Gupta empire was further spread west over the Ganga Yamuna Valley up to Mathura. The subordinate rulers were entitled to pay tributes to the Gupta rulers and followed the orders of the Gupta rulers. Apart from them, as mentioned earlier, there were some *ganas* whose polity was subordinated in the Gupta empire - the Malavas, Madrakas, Kakas, Arjunayanas, Prarjunas, Yaudheyas, Abhiras, Sanakanikas and Kharaparikas. Upinder Singh argues that the interaction between the Gupta emperors and their subordinate rulers was feudal in nature, even though it was not explicitly mentioned. There are also references to the capture and release of southern rulers by Samudragupta. Some later, Kushana rulers (Daivaputra Shahi and Shahanu Shahi) made matrimonial ties with the Gupta rulers. Sakas, Murundas and the Sinhala (Sri Lanka) also paid tributes to Samudragupta. Towards the end of his rule, Samudragupta occupied most of north India except Kashmir, Sindh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and western Punjab. The northwestern part of the empire had Sakas and Kushans, the South, Dakshinapatha rulers and then Sri Lanka. There is a reference in a Chinese source that a Sri Lankan ruler, Meghavarman, was permitted by Samudragupta to construct a monastery and a rest house for pilgrims from Sri Lanka at Bodh Gaya.

◆ Saka invasion

According to the Gupta genealogy, the son of Samudragupta, Chandragupta II, became his successor. However, some historians claim that Ramagupta was the immediate successor of Samudragupta and ruled between c. 370 and 375 CE. The play *Devi-Chandragupta* of Vishakhadeva, also known as Vishakadatta, mentions the invasion of the kingdom of Ramagupta by the Saka ruler. To bring peace, he surrendered his queen, Dhruvadevi. The incident made his brother Chandragupta kill the Saka ruler and Ramagupta, and then he married the queen. Later texts such as *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta and *Majmat-ut-Tawarikh* by Abul Hasan Ali discuss the killing of the Saka ruler by Chandragupta.

◆ Territorial expansion at its peak

However, the Gupta empire reached the pinnacle of territorial expansion during the reign of Chandragupta II. He was referred to as *Parama-bhagavata* and *Vikramaditya*. The name Chandra mentioned on the Mehrauli iron pillar is considered to be the Gupta ruler, Chandragupta II, as



he is also referred to as Chandra on his coins. the fight of Chandragupta with the enemies from Bengal and his Punjab campaign are marked in the Mehrauli pillar inscription. The daughter of Chandragupta, Prabhavatigupta, was married to the Vakataka ruler Rudrasena II. Kumaragupta succeeded Chandragupta II and is known to have performed the *aswamedha* sacrifice.

◆ Later Gupta rulers

During Skandagupta's rule, the Huna invasion was repelled by the Gupta army. Purugupta, Kumaragupta II, Budhagupta, Narasimhagupta, Kumaragupta III, and Vishnugupta were the later Gupta rulers. Subordinate rulers became more independent as the empire disintegrated. The ascent of Yashodharman of Malwa, pressure from the Vakatakas, and Huna incursions are just a few of the causes that appear to have contributed to the disintegration of the Gupta empire.

4.2.2.1 Administration

◆ Monarchical rule

As mentioned earlier, the period between c. 300 to 600 BCE witnessed the reign of the Guptas in north India and the Vakatakas in the northern and central regions of the Deccan. The tribal assemblies or *gana sanghas*, predominant before this period, paved the way to monarchical rule under the Guptas. The Lichhavis were an example of *gana sangha*, which later joined the Gupta empire and adopted monarchical rule. As mentioned in the previous sections, certain frontier rulers and subordinate rulers who followed non-monarchical rule paid tribute to Samudragupta. Some of them from Malwa and Rajasthan were assimilated into the Gupta Empire. Eventually, they were also brought under the control of the Gupta ruler.

◆ Practice of associating the Gupta emperors with divinity

The emperor was at the centre of the Gupta administration. While certain Gupta emperors used the titles such as *Maharajadhiraja*, *Parameshvara*, and *Paramabhattacharaka*, the Vakataka rulers used the title, *Maharaja*. The coins depicted the Gupta emperor as courageous, representing them as killing a lion or a tiger. There was also a practice of associating the Gupta emperors with divinity. For instance, Samudragupta was eulogised as *achintyapurusha*, a deity who lives on Earth and was also compared to Yama, Kubera, Indra and Varuna.

◆ Officials of the Gupta administration

The Gupta ruler was depicted as a defender of his domain. It is speculative whether a post of minister existed in both the Gupta and Vakataka dynasties. Virsasena Saba was considered to have been appointed as *Sachiva* (minister)

during the period of Chandragupta II. According to the numismatic evidence, there existed the posts of *Pratihara* (Palace Guards) under a *Maha-pratyahara*.

◆ Administrative division

The Gupta Empire was divided into provinces or regions known as *deshas*, *rashtras* or *bhuktis*. These provinces were under the control of the governors who were appointed by the king. Some of these provinces mentioned in the Gupta inscriptions include *Tirabhukti*, *Magadhabhukti* and *Nagarabhukti*. Under *bhuktis*, there were territorial divisions controlled by *Vishayapatis* or *Ayuktas*, who were chosen by the provincial governor. The assistant officials known as *Kumaramatyas* were appointed as governors. They served as a bridge between the central and provincial administration and were also involved in the revenue department. Historical evidence suggests that *Kumaramatyas* may have held other titles and that their ranks could be passed down through generations. The administrative units below the district level in different regions were referred to by different names such as *bhumi*, *pathaka*, *ashtakuladhikarana*, *vithi* and *petha*. These units were in charge of several villages and were governed by *ayuktakas* and *vithi-mahattaras*. Out of this, the smallest unit was the *grama*, headed by a *gramika* or *gramadhyaksha*.

◆ Gupta army

Guptas established paramountcy on many parts of the Indian subcontinent through their military strength. The emperor led the army in times of war, and in peace, a minister known as *Sandhi-Vigrahika* was in charge. *Mahabaladhikrita* were the group of officials posted under this minister. They included *Pilupati* (head of elephants), *Ashvapati* (head of horses), and *Narapati* (head of foot soldiers). The army was paid in cash, and the officer who was in charge of their needs was known as *Ranabhandagarika*. His responsibility was to ensure sufficient weaponry.

4.2.3 Myth of the Golden Age

◆ Concept of 'golden age'

Some Indian historians during the period of the Indian National Movement glorified the period of the Guptas as the 'Golden Age' in Indian history. It was a response to the colonial narratives demeaning India's ancient past. The nationalist writings assumed the Gupta period as economically progressive and socially harmonious. What they projected as the salient features of the Gupta period include the unification of a large area under a centralised government system, advancement in the field of architecture and stone sculpture, and proliferation of Sanskrit works.



Towards the mid-twentieth century, there were attempts to eradicate the preconceptions and bias of nationalist writings in the interpretation of the Gupta period. According to R.S. Sharma, even though the Gupta period is known as the 'Golden Age', its economic prosperity may be debated as several towns in northern India experienced a decline. Nevertheless, the Gupta rulers possessed a significant amount of gold, evident from their issuance of a large number of gold coins.

◆ 'Age of
Brahmanical
Renaissance'

The period is also known as the 'Age of the Brahmanical Renaissance' as the Guptas supported the flourishing of Hinduism through the construction of temples and other structures as well as the provision of land grants to the Brahmanas, and so on. There have been comparisons to historical periods like the "Augustan age" in Rome, which was marked by Emperor Augustus' cultural and literary revival, and the "Periclean age" in Greece, which was characterised by political hegemony, economic expansion, and cultural flourishing of Athens. There is criticism on the grounds of whether all these advancements during the Gupta era benefited the entire population.

4.2.3.1 Cultural Contributions

◆ Emergence of
Bhagavatism

Bhagavatism emerged during the post-Mauryan period and revolved around the worship of Vishnu or Bhagavata. In Vedic times, Vishnu held a lesser position as a deity representing the sun and fertility cult. However, by the 2nd century BCE, Vishnu merged with a god called Narayana and became known as Narayana-Vishnu. Initially, Narayana was a non-Vedic tribal god referred to as bhagavata, and his worshippers were known as *bhagavatas*. The merging of Vishnu and Narayana united the followers of Vishnu and Narayana. Vishnu was further identified with Krishna-Vasudeva of the Vrishni tribe in western India. By 200 BCE, these three streams of gods and their followers merged, giving rise to Bhagavatism or Vaishnavism.

Bhagavatism emphasized *bhakti* (devotion) and *ahimsa* (non-violence). This new religion was open enough to attract foreigners and appealed to artisans and merchants who gained significance during the Satavahana and Kushan periods. By the time of the Gupta period, Bhagavatism or Vaishnavism had overshadowed Mahayana Buddhism. The religion propagated the doctrine of the incarnation, with Vishnu appearing in human form to restore social

◆ Features of Bhagavatism

order. Bhagavatism overshadowed Shiva worship initially. Temples with idol worship and festivals gained popularity during the Gupta period. It is considered that the Gupta rulers embraced a policy of religious tolerance, allowing Buddhism and Jainism to flourish alongside their own faith. There is no such evidence of the persecution of the followers of Buddhism or Jainism. It is considered that it may have been partly due to changes happening in Buddhism by incorporating many features of Brahmanism or Hinduism.

◆ Development of classical Sanskrit

During the period of Guptas, Classical Sanskrit emerged and developed. The Gupta rulers were enthusiastic patrons of Sanskrit, and it became the official language of their court. All the inscriptions of the Guptas were composed in Sanskrit. Previously, Sanskrit had been overshadowed by Buddhist and Jaina traditions that favoured vernacular dialects like Pali, Prakrit, and Ardhamagadhi. However, under the Guptas, Sanskrit experienced a revival and became widely used throughout northern India. Even Buddhist scholars, particularly those following Mahayana Buddhism, began composing their scriptures in Sanskrit. The Gupta period witnessed the emergence of great poets, dramatists, grammarians, and playwrights who made significant contributions to Sanskrit literature. During this era, there were significant advancements and refinements made in the field of Sanskrit grammar, built upon the foundations established by Panini (6th - 4th century CE) and Patanjali (2nd century CE). Amarasimha, a celebrated lexicographer from the court of Chandragupta Vikramaditya, composed the renowned Sanskrit dictionary *Amarakosha*, also known as the *Namalinganushasana*.

◆ Compilation of Hindu religious texts

Hindu religious texts were codified and revived during the Gupta era. The *Puranas* and *Smritis* were compiled and expanded, providing a thorough understanding of Hindu mythology, rituals, and ethical principles. The Gupta rulers themselves were patrons of literature and learning, with renowned Sanskrit writers and poets like Kalidasa flourishing during this time. The literary accomplishments of the Gupta period include the plays *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam* and poetic works like *Raghuvamsham*, *Kumarasambhavam*, and *Meghaduta* by Kalidasa. The compilation of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is considered to have taken place during this period.

Aryabhatta, a mathematician from Pataliputra, demonstrated



◆ Science and technology

proficiency in various calculations, including the zero system and decimal systems. He wrote the *Aryabhattiyam*, a significant work on geometry, algebra, arithmetic, and trigonometry. An inscription from the Gupta period in 448 CE, discovered in the Allahabad district, provides evidence that the decimal system was already known in India by the early fifth century. Other notable authors include Varahamihira, who wrote the *Brihat Samhita* on topics like astronomy and botany. *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita* were significant contributions to the field of medicine. Additionally, an astronomical treatise known as the *Romaka Sidhanta* was compiled during this period, showing influences from Greek and Roman ideas.

◆ Gupta architecture

According to R.S Sharma, architecturally, the Gupta period had limited achievements. Only a few temples made of brick in Uttar Pradesh, such as the temples in Bhitargaon (Kanpur), Bhitari (Ghazipur), and Deogarh (Jhansi) and a stone temple are noteworthy. The Gupta period witnessed a transition from the earlier tradition of rock-cut shrines to a new level of temple construction. Stones or bricks were primarily used in their construction. The Buddhist university at Nalanda, established in the fifth century, featured its earliest brick structure during this period.

◆ Craftsmanship

The Gupta period saw the creation of stone statues that depicted Hindu deities in various forms. One of the most renowned examples is the standing figure of Vishnu from Mathura. Another remarkable sculpture is the "Brahma from Mirpur-Khas," a four-headed depiction of the Hindu god Brahma. During the Gupta period, a life-size copper image of the Buddha of more than 6 feet was made. It was discovered at Sultanganj near Bhagalpur and is now displayed in Birmingham. Gupta craftsmen excelled in iron and bronze work, as it is evident in the production of bronze Buddha images on a large scale. The iron pillar found in Mehrauli, Delhi, was manufactured in the fourth century CE. The pillar, which defied rusting for over fifteen centuries, is a testament to the technological skill of these craftsmen and the arid conditions of Delhi.

The period also witnessed a complete abandonment of the Hellenistic influence visible in the Gandhara style. The Jaina sculptures from Durjanpur near Vidisha, dating back to the Gupta era, are also important. One well-preserved sculpture features a central figure in the *dhyana-mudra* hand gesture, exhibiting a transition from the Kushana to Gupta

◆ Gupta paintings and sculptures

style. These sculptures are dated to the reign of Gupta King Ramagupta. The most exceptional specimens of Buddhist art from the Gupta era are the Ajanta paintings. While these paintings span from the first century BCE to the seventh century CE, the majority belong to the Gupta period. They vividly portray events from the life of Gautama Buddha and the birth stories of previous Buddhas as recounted in the *Jatakas*. Ajanta caves also had Gupta art in the form of sculptures, such as the image of Nagaraja with his queen in Cave 9. Furthermore, a remarkable large horse sculpture in Khairagarh (UP) is believed to represent a sacrificial horse used by Samudragupta during an *Aswamedha* ritual.

◆ Historiographical shift

4.2.4 Indian Feudalism

In the 20th century, the understanding of socio-economic and political structures of the Gupta period gathered more importance than mere political narratives. Marxist scholars such as D.D. Kosambi and B.N Datta had already discussed the stage of Indian feudalism. The concept was further developed by R.S Sharma that the fundamental features of feudalism present in the Gupta period were strengthened in the later period. To understand more about the feudalism debate, let us have a look at the economic structure of the Gupta period.

◆ Agrarian economy

4.2.4.1 Gupta Economy

The Gupta economy was primarily agrarian, with agriculture serving as the backbone. However, it was not solely reliant on agriculture, as other sectors, such as commerce, trade, and craftsmanship, also played crucial roles. As a result of these occupations involving various social groups, changes began to take place in the economic production pattern and the relationship between these groups. The main source of revenue of the state came from agriculture. A wide variety of crops were raised with extensive knowledge of the various soil types. The sources such as *Amarakosha* provide information on various crops cultivated during this time, including paddy, cotton, oil seeds, indigo, and mustard seeds. *Amarakosha* lists twelve different kinds of soil, including those that are dry, fertile, desiccated, untitled, grassy, muddy, marshy, and well-watered by rivers or rainfall.

A sophisticated system of taxation was implemented, with land revenue being the tax collected by the Gupta

◆ Taxation system

administration. The state appointed officials to collect taxes and maintain records of land ownership and cultivation. The Gupta rulers implemented various measures to promote agricultural productivity, such as constructing irrigation systems, providing loans to farmers, and granting land to cultivators. The empire witnessed advancements in agricultural techniques, including the use of iron tools and improved irrigation methods, which contributed to increased agricultural output. Locally managed irrigation devices, such as the *ghati-yantra* or *araghatta*, were widely used. The Sudarsana reservoir (*tadaga*) located in Saurashtra, Gujarat, which was first built during the Mauryan era, is one notable example of the different irrigation practices adopted by the Gupta Empire. It suffered significant damage over time, which required extensive repairs during the reign of Mahakshatrapa Rudradaman in the second century CE. Later, during the reign of Skandagupta, Purnadatta and his son Chakrapalita made additional repairs. There is copper plate evidence on the irrigation methods, such as tanks, ponds, marshy areas, ditches, and embankments along rivers. While the state did contribute to irrigation facilities, it was not solely responsible, as agriculture heavily relied on rainfall.

◆ Provision of land grants

The agrarian society underwent significant changes during the Gupta era. As land grants were given to Brahmanas and religious experts, the land system became more intricate. Brahmanas gained power as they were the highest *varna* and prominent beneficiaries. The *Gramikas*, *Kutumbins*, and *Mahattaras* were other significant landowners in rural society. The Brahmanas gained access to wetlands or forests and also became skilled at managing agrarian activities with the help of agricultural manuals like *Krishiparashara*. Textual records from the Gupta period mention three tiers: the king (*mahipati*), the landowner (*svami*), and the cultivator (*karshaka*), indicating the emergence of landed intermediaries. Landowners now have significant judicial and administrative authority in addition to property rights. Remuneration in the form of land was received by officials, leading to the rise of a class that owned land but did not cultivate it.

◆ Position of cultivators

Meanwhile, the position of cultivators declined as the ordinary cultivators, known as *Krishibala* or *Krashaka*, experienced a decrease in economic and social status. Slaves laboured in the fields of their masters, and even domestic female slaves were subjected to harsh exploitation. Social inequalities intensified, placing a heavier burden on the

◆ Measurement of land

actual tillers of the soil. The state imposed numerous taxes on producers, and the practice of *vishti*, or unpaid labour, further made the plight of ordinary cultivators worse.

Land grants not only show the types of lands given to various beneficiaries but also shed light on methods used for measuring land. A unit called a *vapa* – also known as an *adhavapa*, *dronvapa*, or *kulyavapa* – was used to measure land in the area and is mentioned in Gupta land grant records from Bengal. This precise size of unit is not made clear. A rod (*nala*) that might have been used for linear measurement is also mentioned in some grants. Although there was evidence of diversity in land measurement, there were also a few isolated instances of standardisation.

◆ Trade and commerce

In addition to agriculture, trade and commerce flourished during the Gupta period. Access to major trade routes helped the Guptas in their internal and international trade. Key trade commodities included textiles, spices, precious stones, and agricultural products. Trade routes connected the Gupta Empire with regions such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Roman Empire, enabling a vibrant exchange of goods and ideas. Trade played a crucial role in acquiring both the finished craft items and the raw materials required for production. Craftsmen also played a significant role in the Gupta economy as skilled artisans producing a wide range of handicrafts, including metalwork, pottery, jewellery, and textiles. These exquisite creations were highly sought after both domestically and internationally, contributing to the prosperity of the Gupta economy. The Gupta rulers actively promoted economic growth by providing patronage to merchants, artisans, and traders. They encouraged a favourable environment for entrepreneurship and trade by ensuring the security of trade routes, establishing markets, and regulating trade practices.

◆ Monetary system

The Gupta economy was characterised by a well-developed monetary system. Gold coins, known as *dinars*, and silver coins, known as *rupakas*, were the main currency in circulation. These coins bore inscriptions of the Gupta rulers and were widely accepted as a medium of exchange. Commercial transactions were conducted using the term “*kraya-vikraya*,” and various rulers issued coins to facilitate trade. The Guptas were known for issuing a large number of gold coins, although their gold content was not as pure as Kushana coins. Copper coins were predominantly used



for daily transactions. However, there was a decline in long-distance trade during the Gupta period, particularly due to the acquisition of silk production knowledge by the Eastern Roman Empire from China, which impacted the role of India in the silk trade. The archaeological remains of urban centers from this period also indicate a decline.

4.2.4.2 Feudalism Debate

◆ *Feudal characteristics*

The feudalism debate around the Gupta Age centres on the question of whether the socio-economic structure during that period can be accurately characterised as feudalism. Feudalism is a system where land is owned by a small elite class that grants land to vassals in exchange for loyalty and service. R.S Sharma argued that the political underpinning of feudalism was the land-based administration structure of kingdoms, particularly the institution of serfdom. Peasants were obligated to work on the land that intermediaries held and paid rent to them in kind and labour. The economy was mostly self-sufficient, and most items were produced for domestic consumption rather than for markets. Sharma identified several feudal characteristics, including royal land grants, the transfer of fiscal and judicial rights to the beneficiaries, the grant of rights over peasants, artisans, and merchants, an increase in the practice of forced labour, a fall in trade and coinage, the payment of officials through land revenue assignments, and the expansion of *samantas* (subordinate or feudatory rulers).

◆ *Political breakdown and decline of the urban economy*

◆ *Regional and sub-regional level state formation*

Hence, the period of seven centuries, starting from 300 BCE, was characterised by the political breakdown and the decline of the urban economy. For an extended period, feudalism theory dominated the understanding of the period between 300 and 1200 CE, despite several objections. Scholars like B. D. Chattopadhyaya and Hermann Kulke proposed a different historical perspective in the 1970s and 1980s. They contended that instead of being a period of political fragmentation, the early medieval era witnessed the onset of a dynamic process of 'regional and sub-regional level state formation'. One of the strategies followed by the rulers was to establish the legitimacy of their rule through land grants. It had a significant role in the socio-economic as well as the political system of that period.

4.2.5 Decline of the Gupta Empire

Following Skandagupta, the Gupta Empire disintegrated as the subordinate rulers began to assert their independence.

◆ *Huna Invasion*

The later Gupta rulers had control over only small areas. The Gupta empire gradually came to an end in the middle of the sixth century BCE. The invasion of the Hunas, a branch of the White Huns from Central Asia, was a major factor in the decline of the Gupta power. After conquering Bactria, the Hunas threatened to cross the Hindu-Kush mountains before attacking northwest India. Even though the Gupta emperors tried to repel them, the successors of the Kumaragupta failed to protect the empire. Toramana, the first Huna ruler, conquered North India and extended his rule till Eran in Central India. By the end of the fifth century, the situation became worse with the invasion of north India by Hunas.

◆ *Administrative weakness of later Gupta rulers*

The Gupta Empire was plagued by administrative weaknesses, which contributed to its collapse. The empire's policy of restoring authority to local chiefs and kings in conquered areas, rather than imposing strict control, resulted in the breaking away of feudatories and the re-establishment of independent authority whenever there was a weak monarchy or succession crisis. This diminished the authority of the King and led to the loss of Western India and the consequent loss of significant revenues from trade. Furthermore, continuous military campaigns adversely affected the state treasury. Also, the regional powers exploited the weaker Gupta rulers and asserted their independence. The issuance of land grants to Brahmana reduced revenues, and the decline in demand for silk produced by the guild of weavers caused economic setbacks. The structure of administration was further weakened by the *Samanta* system, which allowed minor rulers to exercise their authority without regard to Gupta authority. There were attempts to reduce the gold content of the currency. However, those went in vain. Although the Guptas continued to rule until the 6th century, their imperial power had already vanished a century earlier.

4.2.6 Rise of Minor Principalities

During the post-Gupta period, several new political forces emerged in different parts of North India. Various sources include *dharmasastra* literature, inscriptions, the *Harshacharita* of Bana, and the travel accounts of Chinese explorers like Fa Hien and Hiuen Tsang shed light on the political structure of the post-Gupta period. Before the rise of Harsha in the seventh century, four kingdoms held significant power: the Guptas in Magadha, the Maukharis in Kannauj, the Pushyabhutis in Thanesar, and the Maitrakas



◆ *New political forces*

in Valabhi. The Kalachuris, Gurjaras, and the kingdoms of Nepal, Bengal, Assam, and Odisha, were other notable principalities that emerged during the post-Gupta period. The kingdoms of Kashmir, Thaneswar, and southern Kalinga were prominent outside of the Gupta empire. While this might suggest a fragmented political landscape resulting from the weakening of central authority, a closer examination reveals that forming new political powers was a continuous process throughout early Indian history. These powers, representing various dynasties, established their own kingdoms and frequently engaged in conflicts with one another.

◆ *Emergence of regional powers*

The post-Gupta period witnessed significant changes in regional power dynamics and the evolution of state formations. In contrast to the large state structure of Harsha, the rise of political powers in various regions during the post-Gupta period was marked by greater stability. These regional powers changed the dominant emphasis on the Ganges Plain and established the political identities of their respective regions. Initially regarded as a “Dark Age” by colonial historiography due to the absence of large states, the study of regional history has highlighted the importance of changes that occurred during this time. The emergence of regional kings and the establishment of state societies across regions during the early medieval period show a continuous structural evolution within regional polities.

◆ *Nature of the post- Gupta period*

Scholars have differed about the nature of this time period, with some emphasising its dynamism and generative attributes while others have labelled it as feudal. The feudalism school emphasises the significance of royal land grants to Brahmanas and officials, which helped to establish a system in which the beneficiaries controlled villages and land and received income without paying taxes. Landed intermediaries controlled the peasants, and there was a decline in the trans-regional trade and urban life. Officials weren't paid in cash because there was a paucity of coins; instead, they were paid with land revenue. The increase in land grants led to the rise of feudatories. However, Romila Thapar and B.D Chattopadhyay provide an alternative interpretation. According to Thapar, during this time, pre-state polities were transformed into states, and minor branch lineages of the main dynasty colonised new areas to set up political strongholds. In pre-state societies, this is viewed as the spread of monarchy and the operation of an “integrative polity.”



4.2.7 Harshavardhana

◆ *Rise of Kanauj as political centre*

Harshavardhana, a prominent ruler belonging to the Pushyabhuti dynasty, ascended the throne in 606 CE in the aftermath of the decline of the Gupta Empire. The Pushyabhuti dynasty centred around Sthanvisvara, the modern-day Thaneswar in the Ambala district of Punjab. Later they ruled from Kanauj in Uttar Pradesh. By the seventh century, the decline of Pataliputra led to the rise of Kanauj in political prominence. Pataliputra relied on trade and commerce. But as trade declined and money became scarce, the city lost its significance, and the power shifted to military camps and strategically important locations. Kanauj, situated in Uttar Pradesh, became a centre of political power from the reign of Harsha onwards.

◆ *Expansion of Harsha's empire*

Harsha is referred to as one of the last great rulers of ancient India. Through a series of military conquests and strategic alliances, Harsha gradually expanded his dominion, eventually bringing much of northern India under his control. His empire encompassed regions such as Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and parts of present-day Nepal. Thaneswar, parts of eastern Punjab and eastern Rajasthan were inherited by Harsha. The ruler of Kamarupa, Bhaskaravarman, was his subordinate ally. In addition to Bhaskaravarman, Harsha also had influence over the kings of Jalandhar and possibly Kashmir. In the south, he shared boundaries with Pulakesin II, the Chalukya king ruling over modern Karnataka and Maharashtra, with his capital at Badami.

◆ *Harsha-Pulakeshin conflict*

Harsha faced opposition from Shashanka of Gauda in eastern India. Harsha's southern expansion was halted by Pulakesin. In his Aihole inscription, Pulakesin states that Harsha's happiness turned into fear when his elephants were defeated in the battle. Huiyen Tsang's account suggests that Harsha took the initiative, but failed in his attempt to overthrow Pulakesin. R. C. Majumdar suggests that the outcome of the battle was exaggerated in Pulakesin's favour by his successors, who made the claim that Pulakesin earned the title of *Parameshvara* by defeating *sakalottarapathesvara* (Harsha). This serves as a notable example of how poets aim to praise their patrons by speaking highly of their royal rivals in *prashastis* (eulogistic inscriptions) to magnify their achievements.

There is limited information available regarding the administration during Harsha's reign. Banabhatta's



◆ Feudal and decentralized administration

Harshacharita and Huien Tsang's accounts, which mention extensively on this period, provide little insight into Harsha's administration. Harshavardhana's reign marks the transition from ancient to medieval times, characterized by a shift in governance from the Gupta model to a feudal and decentralized administration. Harsha's military strength is remarkable, with a reported 100,000 horses and 60,000 elephants, surpassing even the Mauryas. This suggests that Harsha mobilized the support of his feudatories during times of war, greatly augmenting the imperial army. Land grants remained prevalent, extending to priests and officers through charters issued by Harsha. Revenue allocation under Harsha divided funds for the king, scholars, officials, and religious purposes. Land endowments were also granted to ministers and high-ranking officers, indicating the beginning of feudal practices. Consequently, coinage from Harsha's reign is scarce due to this reliance on land grants.

◆ Resemblance to the Gupta administration

The king held supreme authority and appointed ministers and important state officials. The king also led the armies and governed according to the principles outlined in the *Dharmashastras*. A council of ministers, including feudatories, *samantas*, princes, and high officials, assisted the king in administration. The royal palace had a specialised staff of officers, and various departments directly reported to the king. The distinction between civil and military departments was not clear, leading some top civil officers also to perform military functions. Provincial and district administration of this period closely resembled that of the Gupta period.

◆ Law and order

Law and order during Harsha's empire was not effectively maintained. Hsuan Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim, who visited India during this period, reported instances of robbery and acknowledged the existence of strict punishments for crimes. The robbery was treated as a severe offence, leading to the amputation of the robber's right hand. Yet, influenced by Buddhism, the severity of punishment was sometimes mitigated, resulting in lifelong imprisonment for criminals.

Harsha's reign gained historical significance through the accounts of Hsuan Tsang, who studied at the Buddhist University of Nalanda in Bihar and extensively explored India. Hsuan Tsang's detailed descriptions of Harsha's court shed light on the social, economic, and religious aspects of the period, surpassing the reliability of Fa Hien's earlier account. The Chinese record reveals the decline of Pataliputra

◆ Social differentiation

and Vaishali while highlighting the growing importance of Prayag and Kanauj in the Doab region. Social differentiation is observed among the Brahmanas and Kshatriyas, with the nobles and priests leading luxurious lives compared to the simpler lifestyles of the majority. The majority of the higher varnas likely engaged in agriculture, with Hsuan Tsang referring to the Shudras as agriculturists, signifying their role in society. Additionally, Hsuan Tsang's observations shed light on the living conditions and social position of untouchables, such as scavengers and executioners, who resided outside villages, consumed garlic and onions, and loudly announced their presence in towns to avoid contact with others.

◆ Patronage towards Buddhism

It is noted that during the post-Gupta period, Buddhism was fragmented into eighteen sects, and the once prominent Buddhist centres faced decline. Nalanda, known for its Buddhist university, is said to have accommodated 10,000 monks. However, recent excavations suggest a smaller capacity. The Chinese pilgrim I-tsing's account in 670 CE suggested a more reasonable estimate of 3,000 monks. Hsuan Tsang noted that Nalanda's monastery was supported by the revenues of 100 villages, a number later increased to 200 by I-tsing, indicating the vastness of the monastic establishment during Harshavardhana's reign. Harsha, who was initially a Shaiva, became a patron of Buddhism. He organized a grand assembly at Kanauj to promote the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, attended by rulers, priests, and thousands of delegates from various sects. The assembly featured two halls and a towering structure with a golden Buddha statue. Harsha's protective stance towards Hsuan Tsang, despite an assassination attempt, resulted in the arrest and banishment of 500 Brahmanas, shedding light on Harsha's less tolerant side.

◆ Literary contributions

Harsha's reign also witnessed literary contributions, including the plays like *Priyadarshika*, *Ratnavali*, and *Nagananda*. While Banabhatta praised Harsha's literary skills in his book *Harshacharita*, doubts arose among medieval scholars about his authorship. Some believed they were composed by a person named Dhavaka in Harsha's name for personal gain. Regardless, attributing various achievements to kings was a common practice in ancient and medieval India to enhance their image and validate their status among rivals and subjects. Harsha played a pivotal role in establishing this practice, which continued to flourish.



◆ *Harsha's death
and decline of
Harsha's empire*



Chinese sources claim that in 643 and 647 CE, Emperor Tai Tsung of the T'ang dynasty sent two embassies to the court of Harsha. They learned that Harsha had passed away and that someone else had seized his throne during their second visit. The usurper was defeated and captured with the assistance of Nepal and Assam and sent as a prisoner to China. Despite his achievements, Harsha's empire did not last long after his death. His successors were unable to maintain the unity and stability of his realm, and regional powers began to assert their independence. The decline of Harsha's empire marked the beginning of a fragmented political landscape in northern India.

Summarised Overview

The Indian subcontinent experienced a prolonged period of instability following the disintegration of the Mauryan period. From c. 300 to 600 CE, the Guptas were the first indigenous ruling power that emerged as a formidable dynasty with a vast territorial basis in north India after the Mauryas. The Gupta period witnessed significant changes in the political, social and cultural spheres of the subcontinent. Prior to the emergence of the Gupta period, there was an increased interaction between the subcontinent and Central Asia. This resulted in the assimilation of Central Asian cultures, and it played a crucial role in the art and architecture of the period. Moreover, the Central Asian contact has increased the trade relations between both regions.

The Gupta Empire was founded by Chandragupta I and reached its pinnacle during the fourth century CE. As a part of expanding the territory, Chandragupta II and Samudragupta engaged in making alliances and engaged in military campaigns. The Gupta Empire is well known for its effective administration, economic prosperity and patronage of the arts, which contributed to the flourishing of literature, art and architecture. The Gupta period is regarded as the 'Golden Age' in Indian history. The concept derives from achievements in various fields, such as literature, art and science. Moreover, the Gupta rulers patronised Hinduism, and the period witnessed a revival of ritualistic practices.

The Gupta and post-Gupta period saw the emergence of a feudalistic structure. Regional rulers who ruled over smaller territories rose to power as the central authority of the empire gradually disintegrated. These regional rulers, known as feudal lords or *samantas*, exercised considerable autonomy and collected revenue from their territories, giving rise to a decentralised political system. As the Gupta Empire disintegrated, several minor principalities or dynasties emerged across the subcontinent. These regional powers competed for supremacy and control over territories, often engaging in conflicts and alliances.



The Gupta dynasty ruled over north and western India for about 160 years until the mid-sixth century. After their decline, the White Huns emerged in 500 CE and gained control over Kashmir, Punjab, and western India. The Gupta Empire fragmented among several feudatories, but one dynasty based in Thanesar, eventually unified the other feudatories under its rule. Harshavardhana (606–647 CE) emerged as a ruler with Kanauj as his capital and expanded his authority. Harsha's reign is known through accounts like Banabhatta's *Harshacharita* and the writings of Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang. Harsha's influence extended across northern India, excluding Kashmir. Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Odisha were under his direct control, but his influence extended beyond these regions, as peripheral states recognized his sovereignty. Apart from the challenges he faced, Harsha achieved a degree of political unity in a significant part of India.

Self Assessment

1. Write a short note on the impact of central Asian contacts in ancient India.
2. Was the post- Mauryan period a 'dark period'? Substantiate your answer.
3. Discuss the conquests of Samudragupta.
4. How does the numismatic and epigraphic evidence help historians to reconstruct the history of the Gupta and post- Gupta period?
5. Briefly describe the cultural contributions of the Gupta period.
6. What were the factors that contributed to the disintegration of the Gupta Empire?
7. Which were the minor political powers that emerged during the post- Gupta period?
8. Write a short note on Harshavardhana.
9. Explain the nature of the state during the post- Gupta period.

Assignments

1. Describe the socio-political circumstances which led to the emergence of the Gupta empire.
2. Compare the features of the administrative structure of the Gupta Empire.



3. Explain the feudalism debate on the Gupta period.
4. Explain the theory of the 'Golden Age' associated with the Gupta Age.
5. Comment on the achievements of the Guptas in the field of art, architecture, literature, science and technology.
6. Discuss the religious developments that happened during the post-Gupta period.

Suggested Readings

1. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *Land System and Rural Society in Early India*, Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 2003.
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5. Thapar, Romila, *From Lineage to State*, OUP, New Delhi, 2005.
6. Thapar, Romila, *Interpreting Early India*, Delhi, Second edition, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000.
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Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.





Social Formation in South India

Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of the unit, the learner would be able to:

- ◆ know the major prehistoric discoveries in South India
- ◆ discover more about the Megalithic sites and findings
- ◆ understand the peculiarities of the *Sangam* period and its literature
- ◆ analyse the role of Tinais or physiological divisions re-molding the then society based on occupation and landscapes
- ◆ have an awareness about the political entities who ruled those regions influenced by *Sangam* Culture

Background

Based on the archaeological evidence, the prehistoric era is classified into Paleolithic, Neolithic, Mesolithic and Megalithic Periods. The term 'megaliths' pertains to the monuments built of large stones, often referring to burial structures situated in graveyards away from the habitation area. The megalithic culture in South India was a full-fledged iron age culture when the great benefits of the use of this metal were fully realised by the people. The present day regions of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu have a significant concentration of Iron Age sites. This unit delves into the major megalithic and iron age sites in South India. Apart from this, we will discuss Sangam literature which enables us to glean insights into the political, economic, and cultural life of the period. The Sangam literature vividly portrays the lives of the Tamils at the beginning of the historical period. In South India, the Sangam Period spans roughly from the third century BCE to the third century CE. It derives its name from the Sangam academies that were held during that time, and thrived under the royal patronage of the Pandya kings of Madurai. These scholarly works constitute the earliest examples of Dravidian writing. The Chera, Chola, and Pandya dynasties, collectively referred to as *Muventar*, ruled South India during the Sangam age. The evolution of Muventar polity and its features are analysed in this unit.

Keywords

Pre-Historic, Megalithic Culture, Iron Age, Tools, Burials, Society, Culture, *Sangam* Literature, *Tinai*



Discussion

4.3.1. Megalithic Culture and Iron Age Sites

◆ *Megalithic sites in south India*

The first iron artefacts in South India date to the transitional period between the megalithic and neolithic periods. There are several megalithic sites in South India. Adichanallur, Amritamangalam, Kunnattur, Sanur, Vasudevanallur, Tenkasi, Korkai, Kayal, Kalugumalai, Perumalmalai, Pudukkottai, Tirukkampuliyar, and Odugat-tur are some of the locations in Tamil Nadu. Pulimathu, Tengakkal, Cenkotta, Muthukar, Peria Kanal, Machad, Pazhayannur, and Mangadu are significant locations in Kerala. Machad and Pazhayannur have been dated to a period between the second century BCE and the second century CE based on the typology of the items. The approximate date range for the megaliths in Mangadu in Kerala's Kollam district is 1000–100 BCE. The megalithic sites of Brahmagiri, Maski, Hanamsagar, Terdal-Halingali, T. Narsipur, and Hallur are among the significant ones in Karnataka.

◆ *Important megalithic sites in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala*

Among the important megalithic sites in Karnataka are Brahmagiri, Maski, Hanamsagar, Terdal-Halingali, T. Narsipur, (Tirumakudalu) and Hallur. Hallur has a radiocarbon date of 1000 BCE. Kumarnahalli has an even earlier thermoluminescence date of 1300–1200 BCE. Kadambapur, Nagarjunakonda, Yelleswaram, Gallapalli, Tadapatri, Mirapuram, and Amaravati are among the locations in Andhra. From Sri Lanka, megaliths associated with Black and Red Ware have also been discovered. The *kudakkal* and *topikal*, found in Kerala and Karnataka, as well as the menhirs, found in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, are two megalithic kinds that are linked to certain geographical areas.

◆ *Pastoral nomads settlement*

Megalithic sites were formerly thought to be pastoral nomads' settlements. The evidence, however, unmistakably shows that early Iron Age societies in the south subsisted on a mix of agriculture, hunting, fishing, and animal husbandry. Additionally, there is proof of well developed artisan traditions. Along with the megalithic structures themselves, these characteristics point to sedentary life.

Cereals, millets, and pulses were grown by people during the Iron age. At Paiyampalli, charred horse gram, green gram, and ragi grains were discovered. Coorg and Khapa (both in Karnataka) had rice husks, and Hallur had burned ragi



- ◆ *Cereals, millets and pulses discovered from various places*

grains. In one of the tombs in Kunnatur (in Tamil Nadu), rice grains were discovered. There were some regional variations in crops grown. At various megalithic sites, pestles and grinding stones have been discovered. For instance, in a cist near Machad (in Kerala), a granite grinding stone was discovered. According to K. Rajan the megalithic sites were located close to the irrigation tanks.

- ◆ *Paintings and figurines- reveal subsistence techniques*

Paintings and figurines can also reveal some information about subsistence techniques of the Megalithic people. In Kerala, Marayur and Attala, had the portrayals of hunting scenes. At Hire Benkal (in Karnataka), there are images of people dancing in groups as well as hunting scenes with peahens, peacocks, stags, and antelopes. Bones of both wild and domesticated animals are frequently found, which is a sign of domestication and hunting. The domesticated animals included dogs, sheeps, cows, and horses. In Tamil Nadu, a few megalithic burials with fish hooks were discovered.

- ◆ *Specialised crafts*
- ◆ *BRW pottery*

The South Indian megalithic monuments provide proof of highly developed traditions of specialised crafts. Numerous types of pottery, including Black and Red Ware (BRW), have been discovered. Some pots appear to be ceremonial ceramics because their lids include decorative finials in the form of birds or animals. There is evidence of beads making. Etched carnelian beads and other kinds of beads were included in the grave goods. Utensils, bowls, and bracelets made of copper and bronze are present, along with a few silver and gold decorations.

- ◆ *Iron artefacts*

At megalithic sites, iron is typically more prevalent than those made of other metals. The abundance and variety of iron artefacts, including tools, weapons (such as arrowheads, spearheads, swords, and knives), carpentry tools (such as axes, chisels, and adzes), and agricultural implements (such as sickles, hoes, and coulter—the vertical blade fixed in front of a ploughshare) shows the use of iron in daily life. Besides this, more ornate items discovered in graves may have had ritualistic purposes.

Metal objects were made using several metallurgical processes. Some of the bronze and copper artefacts were obviously hammered into shape, while others were cast in moulds. Some societies were skilled at alloying metals. Iron artefacts from Pazhayannur and Machad shows that the metal was comparatively pure and only included extremely minute amounts of other components. The majority of the

◆ *Metallurgical processes*

metal artefacts at these two sites appear to have been forged from thin strips, which were subsequently beaten together to form larger things, for instance, a hook. There is evidence that iron was smelted locally at Paiyampalli, Karnataka. Some megalithic sites must have been centers for the craft production connected to trade networks. This is suggested by the location of several large megalithic settlements on the trade routes of the early historical period. The dispersion of non-local products made of precious metals and semiprecious stones also points to interregional commerce.

◆ *Excavations in Kudatini and Kodumanal*

A very well-preserved late neolithic or early iron age sarcophagus burial was discovered during recent excavations in Kudatini in the Bellary area. This was an additional interment. Remains of a body were found in the sarcophagus and the pots surrounding it; the deceased was likely a youngster who passed away at the age of 6 or 7. In Tamil Nadu's Erode district, excavations at the Kodumanal, which dates from the third century BCE to the first century CE, uncovered a number of novel characteristics. A deer was buried in an urn and was found in a cist together with carved carnelian beads, a sword, and axes. The corridor appears to have served as a place where ceremonies could be carried out against the port hole in cist tombs. Another significant discovery at Kodumanal was graffiti written in ancient Tamil-Brahmi on burial goods.

◆ *Lives and experiences of the megalithic societies are revealed in the paintings*

Some megalithic burials show that the same burial site was used for many centuries. But it appears that each generation only utilised the tombs once or twice. Within a stratified society, they probably represent a limited elite group. Fewer megalithic tombs feature burials of children and young adults than the earlier neolithic-chalcolithic burials, and a very high percentage of the burials are of adult men. Megalithic sites' rock art depict fights, cattle raiding, and hunting scenes. White kaolin paintings were found inside rock shelters at the Mallapadi megalithic habitation site in Tamil Nadu Tirupattur Taluk. Two horse riders engaged in pole-based combat in one instance. Another included a person clutching a stick or other object while raising their arms. A war scene, a dancing figure, horse raiders, vegetation, birds, and sun motifs are among the paintings at Paiyampalli. The lives and experiences of megalithic societies are interestingly revealed in these artworks. White kaolin paintings were found at the Mallapadi.



- ◆ Monuments served as places of ceremonies

The construction of megaliths may have been a community endeavour. Moreover, these monuments must have served as places of ceremonies that were significant to social and cultural life of people. According to ethnographic research on contemporary megalithic cultures, the construction of these monuments may have been related to feasting, gift-giving, and the development of alliances.

4.3.2. *Sangam* Literature and *Tinai* Concept

- ◆ *Sangam* - association of poets
- ◆ *Tinai*-geographical terrain

Sangam period provides the earliest known historical records pertaining to south India. *Sangam* period is often earmarked as a specific time period which is hardly identified as the period between second century BCE and second century CE. One of the significant features that need to be noted here is that people and their occupations were directly related with the terrain or with the conditions of the places they dwelled. This concept is often described in south Indian history as the *tinai* concept which consists of a poetical landscape influenced by factors such as flora, fauna, its inhabitants, deities, religion, society, time, place, events etc.

- ◆ Geographical divisions- *Kurinji*, *Mullai*, *Palai*, *Marutham*, *Neital*

As per the *tinai* concept the entire land was divided into or categorised as *Kurinji* signifying mountainous terrain; *Mullai* or the forest land; *Palai* or the dryland; *Marutham* or the wet crop land and *Neital* or the coastal regions. *Sangam* literature vividly describes the activities going on in these regions with its own peculiarities. Furthermore, there were many *Sangam* works that were written during this period like *Manimekalai*, *Silappadikaram*, *Tolkappiyam*, *Akananuru*, *Purananuru*, *Pathinenkilkanakku*, *Pathittupattu* etc. These work provide detailed information about the *Sangam* polity and society.

- ◆ Anthologies

The word *Sangam* in Sanskrit means an association of poets. The word *Sangam* appears in the commentary on the *Iraiyanar Akapporul* by Nakkirar. Six of the eight collections of poetry from the *Ettutokai* (The Eight Collections) and nine of the ten *pattus* (songs) from the *Pattuppattu* (The Ten Songs) may be found in the *Sangam* corpus. The poems' writing style and a few historical allusions imply that they were written between the third century BCE and the third century CE. By the middle of the eighth century, they had been collected into anthologies. These anthologies were compiled into the super-anthologies, (or anthologies of anthologies), known as the *Ettutokai* and the *Pattuppattu*, a few centuries later.

A portion of the first two volumes of *Tolkappiyam* can also be categorised as *Sangam* literature. Although it discusses phonology, semantics, syntax, and literary norms, the *Tolkappiyam* is primarily a treatise on grammar.

◆ *Akam and Puram*

There are two kinds of *Sangam* poems—*akam* and *puram*. The main theme of *akam* poetry was love, whereas the main theme of *puram* poems was battle. *Puram* poetry, according to A. K. Ramanujan is ‘public poetry’ that addresses a variety of topics other than love, including good and evil, the community, and kingdom. The poems were fashioned after the bardic ballads of earlier times and were first passed down orally for an extended period of time before being written down. The anthologies covered 2,381 poems, attributed to 473 writers, 30 of whom were women. The poets were from both cities and small towns, and their social and professional backgrounds were diverse. The subjects and writers of *Sangam* poetry provide us a clear sense of daily life at the time they were written.

◆ *Tirukkural, Silappadikaram and Manimekhalai*

Tamil writers produced a number of didactic works after the fifth century. The most well-known of them is Tiruvalluvar’s *Tirukkural*, a book on love, politics, and ethics written in the fifth or sixth centuries. The two *magnum opus* works of *Sangam* period *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekhalai*, composed in about the 5th–6th centuries CE.

4.3.2.1. *Tinai* Concept

◆ *Aintinai*

The *Tinai* concept helps one to know more about the structure of the society of ancient Tamilakam. According to the *Tinai* songs there were five *Tinais* (*Aintinais*) in Tamilakam. The people of ancient Tamilakam either lived in villages or fortified cities. They classified the then land into five divisions based on their natural formation and vegetation, i.e., *Kurinji* or the hilly land, *Mullai* (forest land), *Marutham* (agricultural land), *Neithal* (Coastal land) and *Palai* (desert land). They worshiped nature, gods, snakes and trees.

◆ *Tamil sources testifying the existence of Tinai system*

The songs of *Ettutokai* and *Patittupattu* testify that each *Tinai* had three separate factors known as *Muthal*, *Karu* and *Uri*. *Muthal* denoted space and time, *karu* was related with the principal diet, flora and fauna, deity and livelihood and *Uri* was related with love and war. The social, economic, political and cultural life of the ancient Tamilakam are reflected in the concept of *Tinai*.



◆ *Inhabitants of Kurinji and Mullai*

The inhabitants of the *Kurinji Tinai* were *Kanavar*, *Vetar* and *Kuravar*. The occupation of the inhabitants were hunting and food gathering. Various types of birds, elephants, lions, bears etc were seen in the area of *Kurinji*. The God of *Kurinji* was *Murugan* and *Vel*. Teak, sandal wood and bamboo are common trees seen in *Kurinji* area. The principal occupation of the *Mullai* region was cattle rearing and cultivation. The people who lived in the *Mullai* area were *Idayar* and *Ayar*. Agriculture was only a secondary occupation of the people in this region. They had cultivated horse gram and *Mayan* or *Tirumal* was the chief deity of this *Tinai*.

◆ *Life in Palai Marutham and Neital*

Maravar and *kallar* were the two important groups of people who lived in the dry areas of the *Palai* region. Then their main occupation was plunder. It was not possible for them to produce anything in the dry zone of the *Palai*. So they took to plunder other people, several descriptions are seen in the *Purananuru* about the plundering activities of the people of *Palai* area. The raiders used spears, swords, daggers, arrows and bows to plunder the possession of the traders. Some songs in *Akananuru* and *Purananuru* praise the heroic deeds of the dead ones who died while fighting with the robbers. The *Nadukal* seen all over south India were erected in the memory of these heroes. The wetlands of *Marutham* were cultivated by *uzhavar* and *thozhuvar*. *Parathar*, *Parathiyar*, *Minavar*, *Alavar*, *Alathiyar* etc were the inhabitants of the coastal region of the *Neital* and they were engaged in fishing and salt making.

◆ *Use of iron tools*

Remains of iron objects have been discovered at the megalithic sites in Kerala and at *Adichanallur* in *Tamilnadu*. From this evidence, it is understood that the people of ancient *Tamilakam* had used iron tools in agricultural activities. The chief agricultural product was paddy and they used bullocks or buffaloes to plough. Tamil songs refer to the pepper cultivation in the *Kurinji* Area.

◆ *Interconnection of five geographic regions*

The characteristics of the aforementioned five categories of geographic regions are interconnected with each other for their subsistence. The *Sangam* poetry not only explains the love affair, but goes beyond the intimate aspects to represent the particular culture of the inhabitants. By using such a method, these literary works attain universality.

4.3.3 Features of Muventar Polity

4.3.3.1 Cheras

◆ Muventar

The political history of ancient Kerala is re-constructed mainly from the Tamil classical works known as the *Patittupattu*, *Paripadal*, *Nattina* and *Purananuru*. In the ancient period Tamilakam was ruled by *Muventar*- Chera, Chola and Pandya rulers. *Patittupattu* deals with the political history of ten chera kings, and is divided into ten parts relating to ten kings. Each song has eight to ten lines. The first and last part of *Patittupattu* are declared as lost. The information about these two kings are compiled from *Akananuru* and *Purananuru*. *Patittupattu* and *Purananuru* provide significant information for the re-construction of the history of Kerala.

◆ Purananuru and Akananuru

Purananuru consists of 400 poems dealing with *Puram* or matters dealing with external affairs such as war, peace and government. The ten chera kings mentioned in the *Patittupattu*, *Purananuru* and *Akananuru* are - Utayan Cheralathan, Imayavaramban Nedumcheralathan, Selkett Kuttuvan, Narmudi Cheral, Chera Senguttuvan, Perum Cheral Irumporai, Ilam Cheral Irumporai and Yanaikal Cheral Irumporai.

◆ Utayan Cheralathan assumed the title Vana Varamban

Chera imperialism started during the time of Utayan Cheralathan. He assumed the title *Vana Varamban*. He maintained friendly relations with the rulers of Tulunadu chiefs of Pazhani and Porainadu. He gave his daughter in marriage to king Nanan I of Tulunadu. According to the Tamil songs, Utayan was wounded on his back side in the battle of Venni against the Chola king Karikala and feeling humiliated he committed self-immolation by fast unto death sitting northwards (*vadikirikkal*).

◆ Imayavaramban

The second part of *Patittupattu* mentions about Imayavaramban Nedumcheralathan. His heroic deeds are written and praised by the poet Kumathur Kannanar. The poet calls his hero 'Imayavaramban' which either means as a great emperor with his empire having boundaries in Himalayas or simply as the 'beloved of the Gods'.

Chera Senguttuvan was known as the greatest ruler and was the son of Neduncheralathan. He assumed the title 'Kadal Pirakottiya Velkelu Kuttuvan' among the Cholas and ruled over a period of 55 years. Chera Irumporai was



◆ *The reign of Senguttuvan*

the son of Selvakadunko Irumporai. He was the last of the imperial Cheras. During his reign, he won a decisive victory against a Chola king. His time period is often stated as one of the prosperous times in the history of first Chera empire. After his demise, empire began to decline as his successors were incompetent and weak. In fact, it was their luxurious life pattern and neglect of official responsibilities from time to time that led to the ultimate disintegration of the empire. External invasions further accelerated this process. The rise of other formidable powers like Chalukyas, Pallavas, Pandyas etc. seriously affected the fortunes of the Chera empire.

4.3.3.2 Cholas

◆ *Karikala Chola's military success and administration*

The Chola kingdom of the *Sangam* period was extended from modern Tiruchi district to southern Andhra Pradesh. Their capital was first located at Uraiyur and then shifted to Puhar. Karikala was a famous king of the *Sangam* Cholas. The *Sangam* work *Pattinappalai* portrays his early life and his military conquests. In the Battle of Venni, he defeated the mighty confederacy consisting of the Cheras, Pandyas and eleven minor chieftains. This event is mentioned in many *Sangam* poems. *Vahaipparandalai* was another important battle fought by him in which nine enemy chieftains submitted before him. Karikala's military achievements made him the overlord of the whole Tamil country. Trade and commerce flourished during his reign. He was responsible for the reclamation of forest lands and brought them under cultivation thus adding prosperity to the people. He also built Kallanai across the river Kaveri and also constructed many irrigation tanks.

4.3.3.3 Pandyas

◆ *Neduncheliyan's administration*

The Pandyas ruled over the present day southern Tamil Nadu with their capital at Madurai. The earliest kings of the Pandyan dynasty were Nediyan, Palyagasalai Mudukudumi Peruvaludhi and Mudathirumaran. There were two Neduncheliyans. The first one was known as Aryappadai Kadantha Neduncheliyan (one who won victories over the Aryan forces). He was responsible for the execution of Kovalan for which Kannagi burnt Madurai. The other was Talaiyalanganattu Cheruvenra, who won the battle at Talaiyalanganam Neduncheliyan. He was praised by Nakkirar and Mangudi Maruthanar. He wore this title after defeating his enemies at the Battle of Talaiyalanganam,

which is located in the Tanjore district. By this victory, Nedunchelivan gained control over the entire Tamil Nadu. Maduraikkanji written by Mangudi Maruthanar describes the socio-economic condition of the Pandya country including the flourishing seaport of Korkai. The last famous Pandyan king was Uggira Peruvaludhi. The Pandyan rule during the *Sangam* Age began to decline due to the invasion of the Kalabhras.

4.3.3.4 Polity

During the *Sangam* era, political forms were still in their infancy. There were only three sizable countries, each headed by a *Ventur* (a crowned monarch), and a vast number of chieftains, known as *Velirs*, who had a small region under their jurisdiction. Three powerful monarchs who separately reigned over sizable areas were known as the *Muventars*: the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas. To establish their reign, the *Muventars* made Vedic sacrifices (such as *Rajasuya*). The names *Chodas*, *Padas*, and *Keralaputos* are used to allude to these kings in Ashokan inscriptions.

- ◆ *Muventars - Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas*

The *Satiyaputos* mentioned in the Ashokan inscriptions are the kings of the Tagadur area (Dharmapuri region in western Tamil Nadu). The chieftains and *ventars* regularly engaged in intra-group battles for dominance. Some of the chieftains fought alone, while others sided with one of the *Muventars*.

- ◆ *Deployment of chieftains and Ventars*

Patittupattu, a collection of eight anthologies, where *Sangam* Cheras' history can be found. The ancestry of the Chera kings is also mentioned in the Pugalur Tamil Brahmi inscription from the early years of the Christian period. From Vanchi and Karur, the Cheras controlled the majority of Kerala and western Tamil Nadu. Vanji is related to the contemporary Karur in the Tiruchirapalli region. Some scholars link it to Kodungallur, a town in Kerala close to Thrissur. The renowned Cheras port was Muziris, which is close to the mouth of River Periyar. The ruler of this dynasty, Senguttuvan, contemporary of Gajabahu of Sri Lanka. Bow and arrow was the insignia of Chera dynasty.

- ◆ *History of Sangam Cheras*

The Kaveri delta was under Chola dominion. The location of their capital was Uraiyur. They also had a second capital in Puhar (Kaveripattinam), which served as both a city and a port. The most well-known ruler of this dynasty was Karikala, who is renowned for having vanquished all of his opponents at a relatively early age and for having constructed a dam or bund across the Kaveri River.

- ◆ *Chola dominion and Kaveri delta regions*



◆ *Pandyas - The first rulers of Sangam age*

The Pandyas are regarded as the first rulers of the *Sangam* age. Pandyas are frequently mentioned in literary works including the *Arthasastra*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the tales of Megasthenes. They had sway over the Tamil region in the south. As mentioned earlier, their capital was at Madurai and port was located at Korkai. The well-known emperor of this dynasty, Neducheliyan, is credited for overthrowing the emperors. The symbol of Pandya was twin fish.

◆ *Chieftains in charge of small regions*

There were various chieftains in charge of tiny regions, including *Ori*, *Kari*, *Pari*, *Atiyaman*, *Nalliyakotan*, and *Ay*. The chieftains frequently engaged in combat in order to rule territory and amass loot. The leader dispersed the loot among the followers (warriors, bards, and others) after collecting it. Some of the chieftains were strong and were honoured by lesser chieftains. The chieftains, including *Pari* of the Parambu Hills, engaged in combat with the *Ventars*.

◆ *The King and his Administrative bodies*

The king considered himself as the protector of the people. The five basic functions which the king had to perform were learning, performing sacrifices, making presents to the brahmins, protecting the subjects and punishing the guilty. Some of the kings of the *Sangam* age were men of letters. They patronized scholars and artists and conferred honors and titles to the people. In the day-to-day administration of the country, the king was assisted by two bodies known as *Aimperunkulu* and *Enperayam*. The former consisted of the *purohit*(priest), army chief, the ambassador, the spies and the ministers and the latter consisted of accountants, executive officials, treasury officials, palace guards chiefs on infantry, cavalry or elephant crops. The duties of the ministers were purely advisory.

◆ *Traditional four divisions in army*

The army consisted of the traditional four divisions of infantry, elephant corps, cavalry and chariots. The navy was the fifth wing of the army. The offensive weapons were *vel* (Spear) *val* (Sword) and *vil* and *ambu* (bow and arrow); sometimes *kavan* (sling) was used in a destructive weapon. The defensive weapons were shields and armours. The blowing of the conch and beating of the drum signalled the beginning of warfare. The king was the supreme commander of the army. Death in the battle- field having wounds in the chest was considered as honour and on the back was considered as a matter of shame. The country was protected by strong forts. At the commencement of each war, sacrifices

were offered to the war goddess Kottavai. Soldiers who died in the war were commemorated with hero stones (*Virakals*) on which their names and achievements were inscribed.

◆ *Law and justice*

There was no written law during this period. Certain customs and traditions constituted the law of the land. The king was the source of all justice. The court of justice in the capital city was called *Avai* and in the villages *manrams*. The king presided over *Avai* and rendered justice in civil and criminal cases. *Arankuru avaiyam* i.e. the capital punishment was given to thieves who were caught red handed. Adultery, theft, robbery and murder were considered as serious crime. Manuneethi Cholan had his son executed for killing a calf. *Manram* was an important institution of the *Sangam* age; its meetings were held by the elders under the banyan tree to help in the settlement of disputes. *Manram* was also the venue for festivals and each village had its *manram*.

◆ *Revenue administration*

Land tax was the main source of income for the government. It was fixed as 1/6th of the gross produce. The other sources of revenue came from excise duties, customs and tolls on imported and exported goods, tributes, court fines etc. The main items of expenditure were the amount spent on wars, maintenance of the royal household, irrigation, patronage to poets, maintenance of civil and military establishments etc. Coins and weights & measures were known.

4.3.3.5 Economy

◆ *Occupation of the people during the Sangam age*

Sangam literature also reflect the economic prosperity of Tamilakam. Agriculture was the chief occupation of the people. The land was fertile and there was plentiful supply of grain. Periyar, Palar, Pennar, Cauvery, Vaigai and Tamraparani were the important rivers. The *Sangam* works vividly describe agricultural operations like harvesting, threshing and drying of grains. Agricultural implements made of iron was in common use. The people followed several other occupations like hunting, spinning, weaving, carpentry, leather work etc. The chief crops cultivated were rice and millets, coconuts, sugarcane, plantains and cotton. The goldsmith made ornaments of exotic designs which had great demands in foreign markets. A high expertise was attained in spinning and weaving of cotton and silk clothes. These were in great demand in the western world especially for the cotton clothes woven at Uraiyur. Inland trade was based on a barter system. Two types of bazaars existed-



Nalangadi (morning bazar) and the *Allangadi* (night bazar). The merchants of the *Sangam* age carried on extensive trade with foreign countries also. Gold was used as a medium of exchange in foreign trade.

- ◆ Important ports and flourishing trade

Many foreign ships called at the Chera ports and the large quantities of spices, pepper, ivory, precious stones, silk cloth, gold ornaments etc. The port city of Puhar became an important place of foreign trade. The main ports were Tyndis, Muziris, Arikamedu and Marakkanam. and Nelcynda. Roman gold and silver coins have been found in large quantities in Coimbatore and Travancore districts indicating flourishing trade. During the *Sangam* era, cotton textiles, spices including pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, and turmeric, as well as goods made of ivory, pearls, and precious stones, were exported. Horses, gold, and sweet wine were the main imports for the traders.

4.3.4 Minor Principalities in Kerala

- ◆ Three powers in Kerala

Politically, the land of Kerala was ruled in the early *Sangam* age mainly by three powers, viz., the Ays in the south, the rulers of Ezhimala (Mount Eli) in the north and the Cheras in the region lying in between.

4.3.4.1 The Ay Dynasty

- ◆ Earliest ruling dynasty in south Kerala

The Ays were the earliest ruling dynasty in South Kerala. They ruled over Nagarcoil in the South to Thirvalla in the North, including the Sahyadri ranges. Ayakudi as the capital of the Ays. The Ays established their power before the Cheras. The *Sangam* works refer to three important Ay kings viz Ay Antiran, Titiyan and Atiyan.

- ◆ Ay Antiran

The origin of the Ays is a matter of dispute. According to the Paliyam Copper Plates (925 CE.) of Vikramaditya Varaguna, they were descended from the family of the Yadavas. Ay Antiran was the most famous Ay king of the *Sangam* age. He has been referred to as the Lord of the 'Podiyil Mountain'. He was a patron of arts and letters. Elephant was the royal emblem denoting the reign of a powerful ruler and a great warrior. He was the head of the army. The kings of the Kongu accepted his overlordship; its territory extended from Pamba to Kanyakumari. The poets of the age like Muda Mosiyar and Kuttuvan Kiranar praised Antiran's benevolence and hospitality in several of their poems. He was a Saivite and patronised Saivism. He practiced polygamy and all his wives committed sati after his death.

◆ *Reign of Titiyan and Atiyan*

Titiyan was the next important Ay king. He is described in the *Akananuru* as “Podiyil Selvan”. The great poet Kapilar and Paranar and the Pandya king Bhuta Pandyan were his contemporaries. The Pandyan king praised the military skill of Titiyan. The next important Ay ruler was Atiyan and his period began the downfall of the Kingdom. The Pandyan king Pasumpon Pandiyan invaded the Ay kingdom and subjugated Atiyan, Paranar has described this fight in the *Akananuru* with clear details regarding this event. The Ay king took part in the battle of Talaiyalanganam in which Pandyan King Nedunchezhiyan defeated seven South Indian kings, Nakkirar has described this fight in the *Akananuru*. In due course, the chieftains of Ezhimala and potiyilmalai had accepted the dominance of Chera power.

◆ *Jayantavarma and his successor*

The Pandiyan ruler Jayantavarma (645- 670 CE) won a great victory over the Ays. Arikesari Maravarman (670-700 CE) the successor of Jayantanvarman won a great battle at Sennilam and defeated the then Chera king. Kochchadayan Ranadhira (700-730 CE) the son of Arikesari was defeated in the battle of Marudur and had to acknowledge the Pandya supremacy. He is also said to have attacked and defeated the *Maharathas* in the city of Mangalapuram. This was followed by a period of temporary peace.

◆ *Jatilavarman Parantaka*

Sadayan and his son Karunandan were the Ay kings in the latter half of the 8th century CE. During this period the Pandyan king Jatilavarman Parantaka (765-815CE) invaded southern Kerala and won several victories. The Madras Museum plates show that Maranjadyan or Jatila Varman also took Vizhinjam which was then the capital of the Ay kingdom. The Ays did not acknowledge the Pandyan supremacy. They continued their fight for freedom. The Cholas of Mahodayapuram might have helped them in their war against the Pandyas. Karunandadakkan was the next important Ay king, who continued Vizhinjam as his capital. He built a Vishnu temple at Parthivasekhara Puram (Parthivapuram). He also established here a *salai* (Vedic college) for imparting free education to *Brahmin* scholars. He was the founder of the famous *Kanthalur salai*.

During the reign of Varaguna the immediate successor of Karunandadakkan, the struggle for political supremacy between the Pandyas and the Cholas began. The pandyas were defeated by the Cholas and their kingdom was annexed to the Chola empire. Varaguna helped the Pandyan in their

◆ The reign of Varaguna

fight against the Cholas. He assumed the title Vikramaditya. He followed a policy of religious toleration. The Buddhists, Jains and the Hindus enjoyed his generous patronage, which is eventually supported by the fact that once he liberally transferred the land as grant to the most celebrated Buddhist temple Sri Mulavasom.

◆ Ay kingdom lost its independent status

Rule of Varaguna, might have ended in 925 CE. The Ay kingdom lost its independent status after the death of Varaguna. Due to the Chola aggressions the later Ay kings might have sought the protection of the Chera Empire. Kanthalur and Vizhinjam were the most important military centre of the Chera Empire and it checked the northward expansion of the Cholas.

◆ Hereditary and Patrilineal system

The Ay inscription threw some light on the political, social and religious conditions in the Ay kingdom. Kingship was hereditary and they used to follow the *Makkathayam* or patrilineal system of inheritance. For efficient administration the kingdom was divided into a number of *nadus* each under a *Kizhavan*, a chieftain of noble birth. The *nadu* was subdivided into a number of *desams*.

◆ Military and judicial administration

The Ay kings strengthened their army. Strict training on various types of combat arts were given to the soldiers of varying ranks to fulfill their responsibilities with much ease. A well-organised form of the judicial system prevailed. Fines were the most common form of punishment for any crime in those days. Fines collected were either in the form of gold or other valuable items of that period. It was remitted either to the state treasury or to the temples.

◆ Temple administration

All temples have a council called *sabha*. The *Brahmins* were only allowed to govern and control temple affairs. The *sabha* was responsible for all transactions including donations and payments on behalf of the temple. Coins were in use alongside *Dinar*, *Kasu*, *Ezhakas*, *Karumkas*, *Pazham kasu* etc. were the important coins that were in circulation.

The Ay kings encouraged education and learning. There was an educational institution called *Salais* in different parts of the Kingdom. There was a *salai* attached to every important temple in those days. The *salai* played a leading part in the cultural life of the people. The major *salais* of the kingdom were *Kanthalur salai* and *Parthivasekkharapuram salai*. It acted out as residential schools in which the Brahmins received free education, boarding and lodging where they peacefully

- ◆ The *salai* as an educational institution

studied vedas and other branches of sanskrit literature. Discipline was strictly enforced in these *salais* in order to build up the moral character of the people. *Kanthalur salai* has been referred to as the “**Nalanda of the South**”.

4.3.4.2 Ezhimala Kingdom

- ◆ The reign of Nannan

The coastal tract between Badagara and Mangalore and the mountainous region lying to the east were included in the Ezhimala kingdom which had its capital at Ezhimala of Mount Eli. The kingdom reached its zenith under Nannan who is celebrated in several Tamil poems. He was a great warrior who ruled his kingdom with an iron hand. He extended his territory up to the Coimbatore region. He came into conflict with the Cheras of Vanchi. He defeat the Cheras and other neighboring chieftains. He scored a brilliant victory over Ay Eynan in the battle of Pazhi. Nannan’s general Mijjili(Chera commander) defeated and killed the Chera captain in this battle. Paranar, the court poet of Nannan, has sung poems in praise of the victory of Nannan in the battle of Pazhi. However the victorious career of Nannan ended in defeat and disaster. The Chera army under Narmudi Cheral defeated and killed Nannan in the battle of Vakaiperumturai and brought Puzhinad under Chera imperial control. Not much is known about the history of the Ezhimala Kingdom after Nannan’s death.

Summarised Overview

Most of the ancient history is re-created using archaeological evidence and in the light of the same it can be broadly classified into Paleolithic, Neolithic, Megalithic and Megalithic each having its own peculiarities of its own. This is the same all throughout the world. Megalithic culture portrayed the existence of iron objects and burials of various kinds. Further studies also proves that the society who were the stalwarts of this culture were well versed in the use of iron, pottery, architecture and metallurgy. They believed in hero worship, ancestral worship and life after death. It is also found that these communities were having contact with people from other countries and indulged in some kind of trade related activities as well. Most of the studies conducted in this field are through iron objects, tools and burials excavated from this period.

Historians refer *Sangam* era, as the “Golden age” of the Tamils, was a particularly significant period in the history of Tamilakam. The archaeological evidence gathered from numerous excavated sites sheds insight on several facets of the political, social, economic, religious, and cultural existence of the *Sangam*



period. However, we have important knowledge in this area because of the priceless literary artefacts from this era that have been retrieved from various locations in South India. In other words, the primary source for research into the *Sangam* era is its own literature.

Sangam, literally translates to an 'assembly', 'college', or 'academy of educated individuals' gathered under the patronage of the Pandyan rulers, who were great admirers of literature and the beautiful arts. The *Sangam* was an association of poets on a volunteer basis. For the first time, the *Sangam* poetry offers a sketch that reflects the development of the state structure in South India. These works show how history has changed through time, showing how tribes have fewer members yet remain strong social structures. The evidence therefore points to the existence of the state as an organised political entity, even if it was not yet established.

The Tamil country was ruled by the three dynasties, named the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas during the *Sangam* age. The Cholas, one of the three *muventars* (three crowned monarchs), controlled the fully irrigated fertile Cauvery (Kaveri) basin with their capital at Uraiyur, the Pandyas controlled the pastoral and littoral regions with their capital at Madurai, and the Cheras had control over the hilly region in the west with Vanji (Karur) as the capital. The *Sangam* texts list the names of so many monarchs, making it extremely difficult to determine their ancestry or timeline.

The most common type of governance was monarchy. *Ventan* was the title of the king. He served as the head of the society and the government. The king was in charge of preserving law and order. He also worked hard for his subjects welfare, watched out for them. This was an era of great chieftains who served under the ruler as well as great kings. They are separated into *velir* and non-*velir* groups. A disagreement exists whether the polity throughout the *Sangam* Age was one of kingship or chieftainship.

With the traditional chieftains demoted to the status of royal officials during the later *Sangam* era, monarchical rule was further consolidated. However the royal officers, gained more power throughout the post-*Sangam* era, while the central government increasingly weakened.

Self Assessment

1. Bring out the sources that were used to recreate the megalithic culture in South India?
2. Name some of the major burial types that were found in South India as part of megalithic culture?



3. What were the metals that were used besides iron in the megalithic period?
4. Name the pottery type that was extensively used by megalithic people?
5. Mention the foreign contacts who were speculated to have visited in the megalithic period?
6. Define *sangam*.
7. What are the important sangam literature?
8. Who were *muventars*?
9. Mention important rulers of the Ay dynasty.
10. Name the important ports of *Sangam* age.

Assignments

1. Trace the major megalithic sites in South India with the help of a map.
2. Discuss the salient features of different types of burials ascribing its origin to the megalithic period in South India.
3. Discuss the *muventar* polity.
4. Bring out the features of Ay Kingdom.
5. Explain the geographical separations of Ancient Tamilakam.

Suggested Readings

1. Ayyappan A., *The personality of Kerala*, Department of Publications, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1981.
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3. Sankalia, H. D., *Aspects of Indian History and Archaeology*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2012.
4. Sastri K.A.Nilakanta, R.Champakalakshmi, *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*, Oxford, 1997.
5. Veluthat, Kesava , *The Early Medieval in South India*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കുരിട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പാറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം
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