

# **CC-1/GE-1: HISTORY OF INDIA FROM EARLIEST TIMES UP TO 300 CE**

## **I. SOURCES AND INTERPRETATION**

The study of ancient Indian history is important for several reasons. It tells us how, when and where people developed the earliest cultures in India, how they began undertaking agriculture and stock raising which made life secured and settled. It shows how the ancient Indians discovered and utilized natural resources, and how they created the means for their livelihood. The study of ancient India history gives us an idea of how the ancient inhabitants made arrangement food, shelter and transport and also hoe they took to farming, weaving, spinning, metal working and the like, how they cleared forests, founded villages, cities and eventually large kingdoms.

The methods of archaeology help us to recover the material remains of the past, relating to ancient, medieval and modern periods of our history.

All historical interpretations are ultimately based on evidence derived from the sources of history. The sources of history are generally divided into two categories- literary and archaeological. Literary sources include all texts-long and short, written or oral. Archaeological sources include all tangible, material remains. But these distinctions are not absolute. All remains of the past, including literary manuscripts are actually material in nature and some kinds of archaeological sources which have writings on them-inscriptions, coins, and inscribed images- can be considered both material objects and texts.

### **LITERARY SOURCES**

Ancient and early medieval Indian texts can be divided into categories on the basis of language, genre, content, age, and the tradition or class of literature to which they belonged.

The oldest surviving text in the Indian subcontinent is the Vedas written in Sanskrit. Like Pali and Prakrit languages Sanskrit also belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages.

### **THE VEDAS**

In the Hindu tradition, the Vedas have the status of shruti (literally, ‘that which has been heard’). They are thought to embody an eternal, self-existent truth realized by the rishis (seers) in a state of meditation or revealed to them by the gods. The category of smriti (literally, ‘remembered’) texts includes the Vedanga, Puranas, epics, Dharmashastra, and Nitishastra.

The word Veda comes from the root vid (literally, ‘to know’) and means ‘knowledge’. There are four Vedas—Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. The Rig Veda contains the world’s oldest surviving poetry, some of it of extraordinary beauty and philosophical depth. Each Veda has four parts, the last three of which sometimes blend into each other—the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishad.

The Rig Veda Samhita is a collection of 1,028 hymns (suktas) arranged in 10 books (Mandalas). The Sama Veda consists of 1,810 verses, mostly borrowed from the Rig Veda, arranged according to the needs of musical notation. The original melodies are, however, lost. The Yajur Veda deals with the details of the performance of rituals. The Atharva Veda is the latest Veda and contains hymns (some from the Rig Veda), but also spells and charms which reflect aspects of popular beliefs and practices.

Vedic literature forms an important part of the Brahmanical tradition—texts preserved and transmitted by a section of Brahmana males. It reflects their religious beliefs, practices, and points of view. As a source of history, these texts are used for information about life in parts of north-western and northern India during the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE.

A number of supplementary texts known as Vedanga (literally, ‘limbs of a Veda’) aimed at helping the proper recitation, use, and understanding of the Vedas. These include works on phonetics (shiksha), metre (chhanda), grammar (vyakarana), etymology (nirukta), ritual (kalpa), and astronomy (jyotisha).

### **THE RAMAYANA AND THE MAHABHARATA**

The two Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, fall within the category of smriti as well as itihasa (traditional history), although the Ramayana is sometimes classified as kavya (poetry). The Mahabharata consists of 18 Parvas (books) and has two main recensions—a northern and southern. The core story concerns a conflict between two sets of cousins—the Kauravas and the Pandavas—and a great war that was fought between them at Kurukshetra. The Ramayana exists in the form of two main recensions—northern and southern. The basic story is about Rama, prince of Kosala; his banishment to the forest due to the intrigues of his wicked stepmother; the abduction of his wife Sita by Ravana, the king of Lanka; Sita’s rescue; and Rama’s return to the capital, Ayodhya, to become king.

### **THE PURANAS**

The word ‘Purana’ means ‘old’. According to tradition, the Puranas were composed by Vyasa, but it is clear that in the form in which they have come down to us, they were not the work of one person nor of one age. There are 18 Mahapuranas (great Puranas), and many more Upapuranas (secondary Puranas). The standard list of the 18 Mahapuranas includes the Vishnu, Narada,

Bhagavata, Garuda, Padma, Varaha, Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Shiva, Skanda, Agni, Brahmanda, Brahmavaivarta, Markandeya, Bhavishya, Vamana, and Brahma. The origins of the Puranas may have overlapped to some extent with the Vedas, but their composition stretched forward into the 4th–5th centuries CE, and in some cases, even later.

The Puranas have accounts of mountains, rivers, and places, which are useful for the study of historical geography. They also reflect the emergence of religious cults based on devotion, especially towards the gods Vishnu and Shiva and the goddess Shakti. This devotion was expressed through the worship of images of deities in temples, pilgrimage (tirtha), and vows (vrata).

### **THE DHARMASHASTRA**

The Sanskrit word dharma (from the root dhri, meaning ‘to maintain, support, or sustain’) is very rich in meaning and difficult to translate. The concept of dharma is based on the idea that the universe is governed by a certain natural law and that the moral laws guiding people’s lives should be in consonance with that natural law.

A special group of Sanskrit texts dealing specifically with dharma are collectively known as the Dharmashastra. These texts can be subdivided into three groups. The first two are the Dharmasutras and the Smritis. The third includes brief and elaborate commentaries, comments and conclusions.

### **BUDDHIST LITERATURE**

Early Buddhist literature is generally divided into canonical and non-canonical texts. Canonical texts are the books which lay down the basic tenets and principles of a religion or sect. The various Buddhist schools classify their

canonical literature in different ways, some into 9 or 12 Angas, others into 3 Pitakas.

There are Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan versions of the Tipitaka (The Three Baskets/ Collections). The Tipitaka consists of three books—the Sutta, Vinaya, and Abhidhamma.

Non-canonical Buddhist literature in Pali includes the Milindapanha (1st century BCE–1st century CE) which consists of a dialogue on various philosophical issues between king Milinda—no doubt the Indo-Greek Menander—and the monk Nagasena.

Buddhist texts are important sources for the history of Buddhism, its doctrines, monastic order, and royal patrons such as Ashoka, revealing many other facets of the polity, society, and economy of their times as well. They offer a non-Brahmanical window into ancient India; however, the Brahmanical perspective is replaced by a Buddhist one.

## **JAINA LITERATURE**

The sacred books of the Jainas are collectively known as the Siddhanta or Agama. The language of the earliest texts is an eastern dialect of Prakrit known as Ardha-Magadhi. Jaina literature offers information regarding the history and doctrines of Jainism, the doctrines of rival schools, the life stories of the saints, and the life of monks and nuns in the sangha. The texts can also be used for information on other aspects of the cultural history of their times.

## **SANGAM LITERATURE**

The earliest literature of South India is represented by a group of texts in old Tamil, often collectively referred to as Sangam literature. The Sangam corpus

includes six of the eight anthologies of poems included in the Ettutokai (The Eight Collections), and nine of the ten pattus (songs) of the Pattuppattu (The Ten Songs). There are two kinds of Sangam poems—akam and puram. Akam poems had love as their theme, while puram poems were mostly about war.

### **FOREIGN ACCOUNTS**

Indigenous literature can be supplemented by foreign accounts. Greek, Roman, Chinese travellers who came to India during the ancient times have left behind accounts of things that they saw. The Indika of Megasthenes, who came to the court of Chandragupta Maurya provides valuable information not only about the system of Mauryan administration but also about social classes and economic activities in the Maurya period.

Greek and Roman accounts of the first and second centuries mention many Indian ports and enumerate items of trade between India and the Roman empire. The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea and Ptolemy's Geography both written in Greek provide valuable data for the study of ancient geography and commerce. Pliny's Naturalis Historia, which relates to the first century was written in Latin, and tells us about the trade between India and Italy.

Of the Chinese travellers, mention may be made of Fa-Hien and Hsuan- Tsang. Both of them were Buddhist and came to this country to visit the Buddhist shrines and to study Buddhism.

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES**

Interpreting is as crucial in archaeology as in using literary sources.

Inscriptions and coins come under the general umbrella of archaeology and archaeological sources, but they are subjects of specialized study in their own right. The study of inscriptions is known as epigraphy. An inscription is any writing that is engraved on something—stone, wood, metal, ivory plaques,

bronze statues, bricks, clay, shells, pottery, etc. Epigraphy includes deciphering the text of inscriptions and analysing the information they contain. It also includes palaeography, the study of ancient writing.

The undeciphered Harappan scripts are the oldest inscription in the Indian subcontinent. The oldest deciphered inscriptions of the Indian subcontinent belong to the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE and are in Brahmi and Kharosthi. These include mainly those of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka.

Inscriptions recording land grants, made mainly by chiefs and princes are very important for the study of the land system and administration in ancient India.

Compared with manuscripts of texts, inscriptions have the advantage of durability. They are usually contemporaneous to the events they speak of and their information can be connected to a time and place. Inscriptions are a valuable source of information on political history. The geographical spread of a king's inscriptions is often taken as indicating the area under his political control. But the discovery of inscriptions depends on chance and not all the inscriptions inscribed during a king's reign need necessarily be found.

Furthermore, moveable inscriptions are not always found in situ, i.e., in their original place.

Numismatics or the study of coins includes the analysis of the material out of which coins were made; the identification of the sources of the metals; the classification and study of the form of coins on the basis of their fabric (size, shape, thickness, design, workmanship), metrology (weight), design, metallic composition, techniques of manufacture, and message content.

Stone age people had neither currency nor coinage and conducted exchange via barter. Chalcolithic cultures too conducted trade without the use of coins. The Harappans, for instance, had a very extensive trade network based on barter.

The Rig Veda mentions words such as nishka and nishkagriva (gold ornaments),

and hiranya-pinda (gold globules), but these cannot be understood as coins. The earliest definite literary and archaeological evidence of coinage in the Indian subcontinent dates from the 6th–5th centuries BCE in a context of the emergence of states, urbanization, and expanding trade. The advent of coinage did not mean the disappearance of barter—both co-existed for a very long time.

The oldest coins found in the subcontinent are punch-marked coins, made mostly of silver, some of copper. They are usually rectangular, sometimes square or round.

At first glance, coins may appear to carry little historical information, but they provide clues to several important historical processes. They are linked to monetary history, which includes an analysis of the production and circulation of coinage, the monetary values attached to coins, and the frequency and volume of issues. Monetary history is in turn an important aspect of the history of exchange and trade. At another level, legends on coins give information on the history of languages and scripts.

A careful collection of the materials derived from texts, coins, inscriptions, archaeology etc., is essential for historical reconstruction.

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## **SUGGESTED READING**

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