

Prehistoric India

History:-History (from the Greek word – Historia, meaning “inquiry”, knowledge acquired by investigation) is the study of the past. History is an umbrella term that relates to past events as well as the discovery, collection, organization, presentation and interpretation of information about these events. It is divided into pre-history, proto-history, and history.

1. **Pre-history** – Events that occurred before the invention of writing are considered pre-history. Pre-history is represented by the three stone ages.
2. **Proto-history** – It refers to the period between pre-history and history, during which a culture or organization had not developed yet but has its mention in the written records of a contemporary literate civilization. For example, the scripts of the Harappan civilization remains undeciphered, however since its existence is noted in Mesopotamian writing, it is considered part of proto-history. Similarly, Vedic civilization from 1500-600 BCE is considered part of proto-history as well. Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures are also considered part of proto-history by archaeologists.
3. **History** – The study of the past after the invention of writing and the study of literate societies based on written records and archaeological sources constitute history
4. **Construction of Ancient Indian History:** -The sources which help in reconstructing history are:
 1. Non-literary sources
 2. Literary sources – which include religious literature & secular literature

Non-Literary Sources :-Coins: Ancient Indian currency was not issued in the form of paper but as coins. The earliest coins found in India contained only a few symbols, punch-marked coins made of silver & copper, but later coins mentioned the names of the kings, gods, dates, etc. The areas where they were found indicate the region of their circulation. This enabled to reconstruct the history of several ruling dynasties, especially during Indo-Greek rule who came to India from Northern Afghanistan and ruled India in 2nd and 1st BCE. Coins throw light on the economic history of different dynasties and also provide input on different parameters involved such as the script, art, religion of that time. It also helps in understanding the progress made in terms of metallurgy and science and technology. (The study of coins is called Numismatics).

Archaeology/Material remains: The science which deals with the digging of the old mounds in a systematic manner, in successive layers and enables to form an idea of the material life of the people is called Archaeology. Material remains recovered as a result of excavation and exploration is subjected to various kinds of examinations. Their dates are fixed according to radiocarbon dating. For example, excavated sites belonging to the Harappan period help us to know about the life of the people who lived in that era. Similarly, the Megaliths (graves in south India) throw light on the life of the people living in the Deccan and South India before 300 BCE. The history of climate and vegetation is known through an examination of plant residues, especially through pollen analysis.

- **Inscriptions/Prashastis** – (The study and interpretation of ancient inscriptions is called epigraphy). Writings engraved on hard surfaces such as stone and metals like copper which usually record some achievements, ideas, royal orders and decisions help in understanding different religions, and administrative policies of that era. For example, inscriptions detailing state policy issued by Emperor Ashoka and inscriptions recording the land grants by Satavahanas, Kings of the Deccan.
- **Foreign accounts:** Indigenous literature can be supplemented by foreign accounts. To India came the Greek, Chinese and Roman visitors, either as travelers or religious converts, and left behind a rich account of our historical past. Some of the notables among them were:
 - Greek Ambassador Megasthenes wrote “Indica” and provided valuable information about the Mauryan society and administration.
 - “The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea” and “Ptolemy’s Geography” both written in Greek give valuable information about the ports and commodities of trade between India and the Roman empire.
 - Hsuan-Tsang, a Buddhist pilgrim, visited India and gave details of India under the reign of King Harshavardhana and the glory of the Nalanda University.

Literary Sources:-

Religious Literature: The religious literature throws light on the social, economic as well as cultural conditions of the ancient Indian period. Some of the sources are:-**The Four Vedas** – The Vedas may be assigned to c.1500 – 500 BCE. The Rigveda mainly contains prayers while the later Vedic texts (Samaveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda) comprise not only prayers but rituals, magic and mythological stories. Read more on the four Vedas in the linked article.Upanishads – The Upanishads (Vedanta) contain philosophical discussions on “Atma” and “Paramatma”.**Epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana** – Of the two epics, the

Mahabharata is older in age and possibly reflects the state of affairs from the 10th century BCE to the 4th century CE. Originally it consisted of 8800 verses (called Jaya Samhita). The final compilation brought the verses to 1,00,000 which came to be known as the Mahabharata or Satasahasri Samhita. It contains narrative, descriptive and didactic material. The Ramayana originally consisted of 12000 verses which were later raised to 24000. This epic also has its didactic portions which were added later

Sutras – Sutras contain ritual literature such as Shrautasutras (which include sacrifices, royal coronation) and Grihya Sutras (which include domestic rituals like birth, naming, marriage, funeral, etc.)

Buddhist religious texts – The early Buddhist texts were written in Pali language and are commonly known as Tripitaka (three baskets) – Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka. These texts throw invaluable light on the social and economic conditions of that era. They also make references to political events in the age of the Buddha. Read more on Buddhism.

Jaina's religious texts – The Jaina texts commonly called “angas”, were written in the Prakrit language, and contain philosophical concepts of the Jainas. They contain many texts which help to reconstruct the political history of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the age of Mahavira. The Jaina texts refer repeatedly to trade and traders. Read more on Jainism.

Secular Literature: There is also a large body of secular literature such as:

- **Dharmashastras/Law books** – These lay down the duties for different varnas as well as for the kings and their officials. They prescribe the rules according to which property is to be held, sold and inherited. They also prescribe punishments for persons guilty of theft, murder, etc.
- **Arthashastra** – Arthashastra of Kautilya reflects the state of society and economy in the age of the Mauryas.
- **Literary work of Kalidasa** – The works of the great poet Kalidasa comprises kavyas and dramas, the most important being Abhijnanasakuntalam. Besides being creative composition, they give an insight into the social and cultural life of northern and central India in the age of the Guptas.
- **Rajatarangini** – This is the famous book written by Kalhana and depicts the social and political life of 12th century CE Kashmir.
- **Charitas/Biographies** – Charitas are the biographies written by court poets in admiration of their rulers such as Harshacharita written by Banabhatta in praise of King Harshavardhana.
- **Sangam literature** – This is the earliest south Indian literature, produced by poets who assembled together (Sangam), and provides valuable information about the social, economic and political life of the people living in deltaic Tamil Nadu. This Tamil literature contains literary gems such as ‘Silappadikaram’ and ‘Manimekalai’. Read more on Sangam Literature in the linked article.

Prehistoric Periods in India – According to Tools

Ancient history can be divided into different periods according to the tools used by people then.

1. Paleolithic Period (Old Stone Age): 500,000 BCE – 10,000 BCE
2. Mesolithic Period (Late Stone Age): 10,000 BCE – 6000 BCE
3. Neolithic Period (New Stone Age): 6000 BCE – 1000 BCE
4. Chalcolithic Period (Stone Copper Age): 3000 BCE – 500 BCE
4. Iron Age: 1500 BCE – 200 BCE

Stone Age

The Stone Age is the prehistoric period, i.e., the period before the development of the script, therefore the main source of information for this period is the archaeological excavations. Robert Bruce Foote is the archaeologist who discovered the first Paleolithic tool in India, the *Pallavaram handaxe*. On the basis of geological age, the type and technology of stone tools, and subsistence base, the **Indian Stone Age is classified primarily into three types-**

- Paleolithic age (old stone age): Period – 500,000 – 10,000 BCE
- Mesolithic age (late stone age): Period – 10,000 – 6000 BCE
- Neolithic age (new stone age): Period – 6000 – 1000 BCE

Paleolithic Age (Old Stone Age)

The term Paleolithic is derived from the Greek word ‘palaeo’ which means old and ‘lithic’ meaning stone. Therefore, the term Paleolithic age refers to the old Stone Age. The old stone age or Paleolithic culture of India developed in the Pleistocene period or the Ice Age, which is a geological period of the age when the earth was covered with ice

and the weather was so cold that human or plant life could not survive. But in the tropical region, where ice melted, the earliest species of men could exist.

Mesolithic Period (Middle Stone Age)

The term Mesolithic is derived from two Greek words – ‘meso’ and ‘lithic’. In Greek ‘meso’ means middle and ‘lithic’ means stone. Hence, the Mesolithic stage of prehistory is also known as the ‘Middle Stone Age’. Both Mesolithic and Neolithic phases belong to the Holocene era. In this era, there was a rise in temperature, the climate became warm which resulted in melting of ice and also brought changes in flora and fauna.

Neolithic Period (New Stone Age)

The term Neolithic is derived from the Greek word ‘neo’ which means new and ‘lithic’ meaning stone. Thus, the term Neolithic Age refers to the ‘New Stone Age’. It is also termed as ‘Neolithic revolution’ since it introduced a lot of important changes in man’s social and economic life. The Neolithic age saw man turning into a food producer from food gatherer.

Chalcolithic Age (Stone Copper Age)

The Chalcolithic Age marked the emergence of the use of metal along with stone tools. The first metal to be used was copper. The chalcolithic age largely applied to the pre-Harappan phase, but in many parts of the country, it appears after the end of the bronze Harappan culture.

Characteristics of the Chalcolithic Age

- **Agriculture & cattle rearing** – The people living in the stone-copper age domesticated animals and cultivated food grains. They domesticated cows, sheep, goats, pig and buffaloes and hunted deer. It is not clear whether they were acquainted with the horse or not. People ate beef but did not take pork on any considerable scale. The people of the Chalcolithic phase produced wheat and rice, they also cultivated bajra. They also produced several pulses such as lentil (masur), black gram, green gram, and grass pea. Cotton was produced in the black cotton soil of the Deccan and ragi, bajra and several millets were cultivated in the lower Deccan. The people belonging to the stone-copper phase in the eastern regions lived mainly on fish and rice, which is still a popular diet in that part of the country.
- **Pottery** – The people of the stone-copper phase used different types of pottery, one of which is called black and red pottery and seems to have been widely prevalent in that era. The ochre-coloured pottery was also popular. The potter’s wheel was used and painting with white linear designs was also done.
- **Rural settlements** – The people living in the stone age were characterised by rural settlements and were not acquainted with burnt bricks. They lived in thatched houses made of mud bricks. This age also marked the beginning of social inequalities, as chiefs lived in rectangular houses while the commoners lived in round huts. Their villages consisted of more than 35 houses of different sizes, circular or rectangular in shape. The chalcolithic economy is considered as a village economy.
- **Art and Craft** – The chalcolithic people were expert coppersmiths. They knew the art of copper smelting and were good stone workers as well. They knew spinning and weaving and were well acquainted with the art of manufacturing cloth. However, they did not know the art of writing.
- **Worship** – Small clay images of earth goddesses have been found from the chalcolithic sites. It is thus possible to say that they venerated the Mother Goddess. In Malwa and Rajasthan, stylised bull terracottas show that the bull served as a religious cult.
- **Infant mortality** – Infant mortality was high among the Chalcolithic people, as is evident from the burial of a large number of children in West Maharashtra. In spite of being a food-producing economy, the rate of infant mortality was very high. We can say that the Chalcolithic social and economic pattern did not promote longevity.
- **Jewellery** – The Chalcolithic people were fond of ornaments and decoration. The women wore ornaments of shell and bone and carried finely worked combs in their hair. They manufactured beads of semi-precious stones such as carnelian, steatite, and quartz crystal.

Gupta Empire:- The decline of the Mauryan Empire resulted in the rise of two major political powers – the Kushanas and the Satavahanas in the north and south respectively. Both these empires brought political unity and economic growth in their respective areas. The Kushan reign in north India came to an end around c.230 CE and then a good part of central India came under the domain of the Murundas (possible kinsmen of the Kushanas). The Murundas ruled for only 25 – 30 years. Around the last decade of the 3rd century CE (about 275 CE), the dynasty of the Guptas came to power. The Gupta Empire established its control over a good part of the former dominions of both the Kushanas and the Satavahanas. The Guptas (possibly Vaishyas) kept northern India politically united for more than a century (335 CE- 455 CE).

- The Guptas are believed to have been feudatories of the Kushanas. The original kingdom of the Guptas comprised Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with their centre of power at Prayag (U.P).

- The Guptas set up their rule over the fertile plains of the Madhyadesha, also known as Anuganga (the middle Gangetic basin), Saketa (U.P Ayodhya), Prayag (U.P) and Magadha (mostly Bihar).
- The Guptas made good use of the iron ore reserves in central India and south Bihar and also took advantage of their proximity to the areas in north India which carried on silk trade with the Byzantine Empire (eastern Roman Empire). **The Gupta period in ancient India is referred to as the “Golden Age”** because of the numerous achievements in the field of arts, literature, science and technology. It also brought about the political unification of the subcontinent
- **Gupta Empire – Chandragupta I (320 – 335 CE):**-Was the son of Ghatotkacha? Chandragupta I is considered to be the founder of the Gupta Era which started with his accession in 319 – 320 CE. He strengthened his position by a matrimonial alliance with the Lichchhavis (Nepal). He married Kumaradevi, a princess of the Lichchhavi clan and this added to the power and prestige of the Gupta family (Vaishyas). He extended his kingdom through conquests. His territory extended from the Ganges River to Prayaga by 321 AD. He issued coins in the joint names of his queen and himself. He assumed the title of Maharajadhiraja (great king of kings). He was successful in building a small principality into a great kingdom. His empire consisted of Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and parts of modern Bihar, with Pataliputra as its capital. He is considered the first great king of the Gupta Empire.
- **Gupta Empire – Samudragupta (c. 335/336 – 375 CE):**-The Gupta kingdom was enlarged enormously by Chandragupta I's son and successor Samudragupta. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription (Prayaga – Prashasti) gives a detailed account of his achievements. He followed the policy of war and conquest. This long inscription was composed by his court poet, Harisena, in chaste Sanskrit. The inscription is engraved on the same pillar that carries the inscription of peace-loving Ashoka. Much of the Indian subcontinent was directly or indirectly under his control – from kingdoms in Nepal and Punjab in the north to the Pallava kingdom at Kanchipuram in the southeast. The last vestiges of the Kushana rule, like the Shakas, the Murundas and even the independent territory of Simhala (Sri Lanka) acknowledged his suzerainty. The places and the territories conquered by Samudragupta can be divided into five groups. He was equally great in his personal accomplishments. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription speaks of his magnanimity to his foes, his polished intellect, his poetic skills, and his proficiency in music. He is known by the title Kaviraja (king among poets) because of his ability in composing verses. His image depicting him with veena (lyre) is found in the coins issued by him. He is also credited with promoting Sanskrit literature and learning, characteristic of his dynasty.
- **Gupta Empire – Chandragupta II (c. 376 – 413/415 CE):**-Samudragupta was succeeded by his son – Chandragupta II. But according to some scholars, the immediate successor was Ramagupta, the elder brother of Chandragupta II. But there is little historical proof for this. During Chandragupta II's reign, the Gupta dynasty reached its peak by expanding territories through conquests as well as by marriage alliances. He married Kuberananga, a Naga princess and had a daughter, Prabhavati with her. He married Prabhavati to a Vakataka prince, Rudrasena II (Deccan). After the death of her husband, Prabhavati ruled the territory as regent to her minor sons with the help of her father. Thus Chandragupta II indirectly controlled the Vakataka kingdom. Chandragupta II's control over the Vakataka kingdom in central India proved quite advantageous for him. It helped him to conquer Gujarat and western Malwa, which was under the rule of Shakas for about four centuries by that time. The Guptas reached the western sea coast which was famous for trade and commerce. This contributed to the prosperity of Malwa and its main city Ujjain, which was also Chandragupta II's second capital. An Iron Pillar inscription at Mehrauli in Delhi indicates that his empire included even north-western India and Bengal. He adopted the title 'Vikramaditya' (powerful as the sun) and Simhavikrama. He issued gold coins (Dinara), silver coins and copper coins. On his coins, he is mentioned as Chandra.
- **Kumaragupta I (c. 415 – 455 CE):**-Kumaragupta I was the son and successor of Chandragupta II. Adopted the titles of 'Shakraditya' and 'Mahendraditya'. Performed 'asvamedha' sacrifices. Most importantly, he laid the foundation of **Nalanda University** which emerged as an institution of international reputation. At the end of his reign; peace did not prevail on the north-west frontier due to the invasion of the Huns of Central Asia. After occupying Bactria, the Huns crossed the Hindukush Mountains, occupied Gandhara and entered India. Their first attack, during Kumaragupta I's reign, was made unsuccessful by prince Skandagupta. The inscriptions of Kumaragupta I's reign are – Karandanda, Mandsor, Bilsad inscription (oldest record of his reign) and Damodar Copper Plate inscription.

- **Skandagupta (c. 455 – 467 CE):-** Adopted the title 'Vikramaditya'. Junagarh/Girnar inscription of his reign reveals that his governor Parnadatta repaired the Sudarshan lake. After Skandagupta's death, many of his successors like Purugupta, Kumaragupta II, Buddhagupta, Narasimhagupta, Kumaragupta III and Vishnugupta could not save the Gupta empire from the Huns. Ultimately, the Gupta power totally disappeared due to a variety of reasons.

- **Rise of Magadha Empire:-**

The four Mahajanapadas – Magadha, Kosala, Avanti and Vatsa were vying for supremacy from the 6th century BCE to the 4th century BCE. Finally, Magadha emerged victorious and was able to gain sovereignty. It became the most powerful state in ancient India. Magadha is situated in modern Bihar. Jarasandha, who was a descendant of Brihadratha, founded the empire in Magadha. Both are talked about in the Mahabharata.

Magadha Empire – Haryanka Dynasty

The first important and powerful dynasty in Magadha was the Haryanka dynasty. **Bimbisara (558 BC – 491 BC):-** Son of Bhattiya. According to Buddhist chronicles, Bimbisara ruled for 52 years (544 BCE – 492 BCE). Contemporary and follower of the Buddha. Was also said to be an admirer of Mahavira, who was also his contemporary. Had his capital at Girivraja/Rajagriha (Rajgir). It was surrounded by 5 hills, the openings of which were closed by stone walls on all sides. This made Rajagriha impregnable. Also known as Sreniya. Was the first king to have a standing army. Magadha came into prominence under his leadership. He had a rivalry with Avanti king Pradyota, but later became friends and Bimbisara even sent his royal physician Jivaka to Ujjain, when Pradyota had jaundice. He started the practice of using matrimonial alliances to strengthen his political position. He had three wives: Kosaladevi (King of Kosala's daughter and the sister of Prasenjit), Chellana (daughter of the Lichchavi chief of Vaisali) and Khema (daughter of the king of Madra, Punjab). He followed a policy of conquest and expansion. Most notable conquest by Bimbisara was that of Anga. He had an effective and excellent administrative system. The officers occupying high posts were divided into three – executive, military and judicial.

Ajatasatru (492 BC – 460 BC):- Son of Bimbisara and Chellana. He killed his father and became ruler. Embraced Buddhism. He convened the First Buddhist Council at Rajagriha just after the death of Buddha in 483 BCE. Read more on Buddhist Councils. Won wars against Kosala and Vaishali. Ajatashatru waged a war against Vaishali despite the fact that his mother was a Lichchavi princess. It took him 16 long years to destroy Vaishali and add it to his empire.

- He used a war engine to throw stones like catapults. He also possessed chariots to which maces were attached which facilitated mass killings.
- The ruler of Avanti tried to invade Magadha and to thwart this danger Ajatashatru began the fortification of Rajagriha. However, the invasion did not materialize during his lifetime.

Udayabhadr/Udayin (460 BCE – 444 BCE):- Son of Ajatasatru. Shifted the capital to Pataliputra (Patna). Last of the major Haryanka rulers. Udayin's reign is important because he built the fort upon the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Son at Pataliputra. This was done because Patna lay in the centre of the Magadha Kingdom, which now extended from the Himalayas in the north to the hills of the Chotanagpur in the south. He was killed at the behest of Palaka, the king of Avanti. Succeeded by three kings – Aniruddha, Manda and Nagadasaka. **Magadha Empire – Sisunaga Dynasty**

According to Sri Lankan chronicles, the people of Magadha revolted during the reign of Nagadasaka and placed an amatya (minister) named Sisunaga as the king. Sisunaga dynasty lasted from 413 BCE to 345 BCE.

Sisunaga:- Was the viceroy of Kasi before becoming king of Magadha. The capital was at Girivaraja.

- The most important achievement of Shishunaga was the destruction of the power of Avanti with its capital at Ujjain. This brought to an end the 100-year-old rivalry between Magadha and Avanti. Avanti became a part of the Magadha empire and continued to be so till the end of the Mauryan rule.
- Later shifted the capital to Vaishali.

Kalasoka

- Son of Sisunaga. Also known as Kakavarna.
- Kalasoka shifted the capital to Pataliputra.
- He conducted the Second Buddhist Council at Vaishali.
- He was killed in a palace revolution that brought the Nanda dynasty to the throne.