

ANCIENT INDIA

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ANCIENT INDIA  
HISTORY AND CULTURE

by

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## PREFACE

**I**N THE following pages an attempt has been made to present an account of life in ancient India both in its political and cultural aspects. The work is so designed as to meet the requirements of the syllabus for the subject "Outlines of Ancient Indian History and Culture" prescribed for study in many universities in India.

Ancient India is a fascinating subject—still full of controversial topics for the scholar and human interest for the layman. The present work is in the nature of an introduction wherein controversies have been merely suggested and human interest sustained. Years of patient and painstaking research by Indian and Western scholars have brought together an abundance of material bearing on this subject. The author has endeavoured to profit fully from the labours of all those *savants* who have made the study of Ancient India their life work and the author gratefully acknowledges his indebtedness to these scholars. The very scope of the work precludes the display of "originality" or the inclusion of "revolutionary discoveries" in the course of its pages. The author's main aim has been to make his work historically as intelligible and interesting as possible and if the student finds his reading of the present work interesting and profitable the author would feel amply rewarded. The author is fully conscious of his limitations and is aware that if the work has any merit, it is solely due to the guidance and enlightenment he received from the authorities on the subject.

Finally, the author takes this opportunity to thank all those who helped him in his work. The author is thankful to Mr. P. S. Jayasinghe of Asia Publishing House for undertaking to publish this work and Mr. R. M. Lala for taking a personal interest in it and seeing it through the press. Thanks are also due to Prof. F. Mendonca of St. Xavier's College, Bombay and Mr. B. Anderson, Assistant Librarian, Bombay University Library, for their valuable help to the author. The author must also tender his thanks to Mr. P. Tana who did the jacket design for this book.

B. G. GOKHALE

The following is the scheme adopted in this work for the transliteration of Indian names and terms:

ā	(Rāma राम)	as in <i>car</i>
ī	(Nīti नीति)	as in <i>tea</i>
ū	(Rājasūya राजसूय)	as in <i>tool</i>
ñ	(Rājanāna राजन्ना)	as in <i>doyen</i> in French
ṭ	(Kauṭilya कौटिल्य)	as in <i>term</i>
ṭh	(Pāṭha पाठ)	
ḍa	(Kāṇḍa काण्ड)	as in <i>done</i>
ṇa	(Rāvaṇa रावण)	
t	(Airāvata ऐरावत)	as in <i>temps</i> in French
th	(Patha पथ)	as in <i>throne</i>
d	(Damana दमन)	as in <i>de</i> in French
dh	(Idha इध)	as in <i>this</i>
r	(Ṛta ऋत)	
ś	(Aśoka अशोक)	as in <i>shape</i>
ṣ	(Harṣa हर्ष)	
Kśa	(Kśatriya क्षत्रिय)	
Jñ	(Jñyāna ज्ञान)	

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PART ONE  
POLITICAL HISTORY



## I.

### THE MATERIALS

**T**HIS is a book of history—a political and cultural history of ancient India. The term history is one of almost daily usage, and it is variously defined. These definitions range from Napoleon's famous aphorism that "history is nothing but a fable agreed upon", to the one by H. G. Wells: "Human history is, in essence, a history of ideas." The history of ancient India is the life-story of the Indian people in their formative stage, struggling to find happiness both here and hereafter. It is a long quest, stretching over some 6,000 years, and it is filled with moments of glory as well as periods of disaster and disintegration. It is, in essence, the story of the Many in the quest of the One, whether in the realm of ideas or in that of national life.

This significant human activity was carried on against the background of this vast land which exerted a controlling influence—sometimes more, sometimes less—on the form that activity took. The mighty mountains and rivers have played a great part in the shaping of ancient Indian history. The Himalayas are celebrated in ancient Indian literature as the abode of snow and peace. In these writings there is also an implication of isolation and protection afforded by them to the land that sloped away to the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. They were also the source of the waters of the Ganges and the Indus without which life would have been impossible to the millions who through the centuries teemed into the land and who, in grateful veneration, called these rivers "Mother". Then there are the Vindhya mountains which for a long time effectually acted as a dividing-line between the north and the south. These geographical factors profoundly influenced Indian history, and we would do well to bear them in mind in our reading of the story of the Indian nation.

As history is an account of something that happened in the past, it is essentially a reconstruction of that past through a selection of significant facts. These significant facts are preserved for us in many forms we call our historical material.

It is worth our while to consider at the very outset the kind of material which we have to draw upon.

The sources of ancient Indian history are both numerous and varied. From the crudely hewn stone-choppers of prehistoric man



unearthed from a desolate mound on a river bank through the imposing remains of a building to the *Life of Harṣa* by the court poet Bāṇa, such is the range of the sources. For the convenience of our study we may class them in two broad groups, literary and archaeological. These two groups may be further subdivided as indicated on the next page.

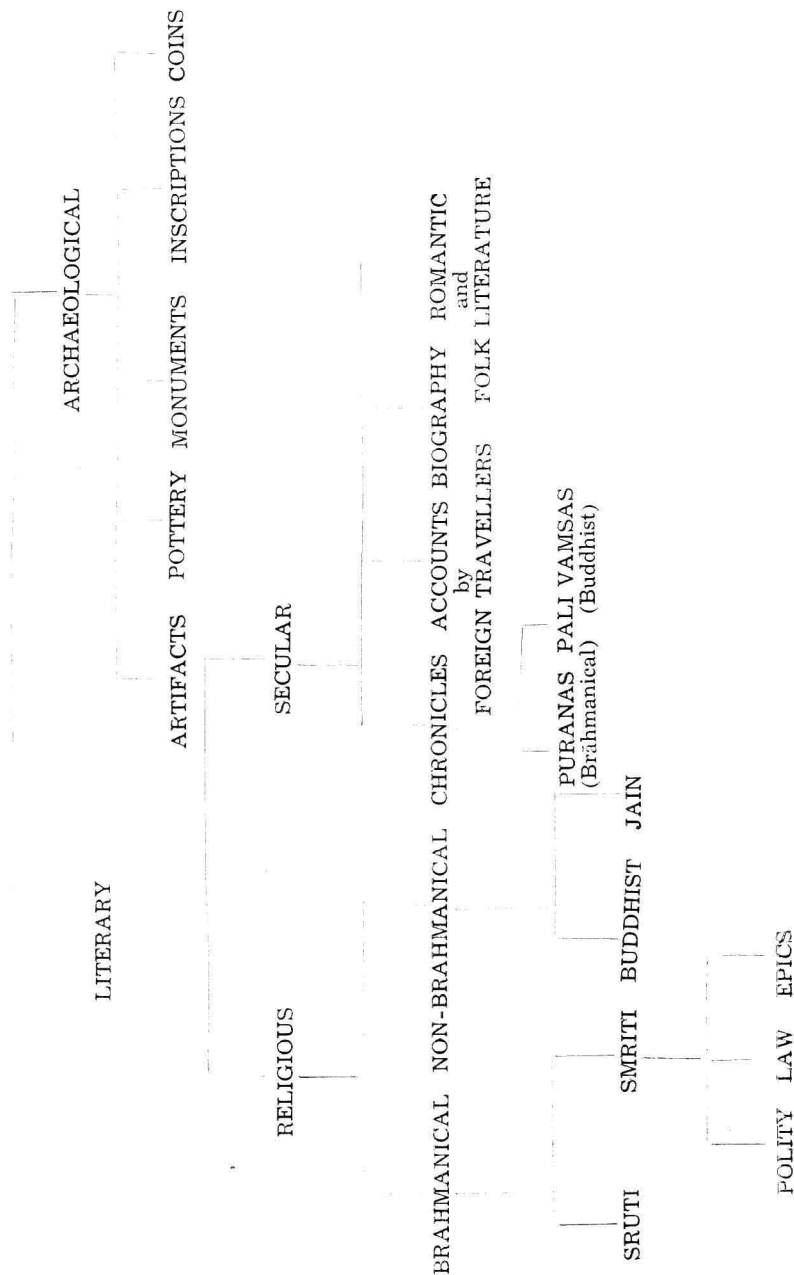
This table needs some explanation. Let us take the group of religious sources first. This group is sub-divided into *Śruti*, *Smṛti*, Buddhist and Jain. *Śruti* means revelation, and comprises the four vedas—*R̥g Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sāma Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Āraṇyakas* and the *Upaniṣads*. *Smṛti* is “memorized” literature, and includes books on polity like Kāuṭilya’s *Arthāśāstra*, law codes like those of Manu and Yājñyavalkya, and the two famous epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Buddhist literature is in Pāli as well as in Sanskrit. The Pāli Buddhist literature consists of the three canonical groups of *Vinaya*, *Sutta* and *Abhidhamma*, and under “non-canonical” are included commentaries on them like those of Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla. The Jain sacred literature is in the Ardhamāgadhī language and is also very extensive.

The group entitled secular literature is of prime interest to us. Historical tradition is preserved in the *Purāṇas* like the *Matsya*, *Vāyu*, etc. (18 in number not counting the apocryphal), and the Pāli *vamsas* like *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa*. The *Purāṇas* give us dynastic lists, and they are of considerable help in directing our way through the meandering course of ancient Indian historical tradition. Similarly the *Vamsas* give us valuable information about certain periods of ancient Indian history.

India was not isolated from the outside world to the extent we were once led to believe. In ancient times, there were brisk and sustained maritime relations with the East as well as with the Middle East. But while mercantile and other relations existed, knowledge as such of outside countries was absent. The invasion of Alexander was a rude reminder to us that ignorance of the outside world could only be disastrous. Soon after Alexander came Megasthenes, as an envoy from the Greek world to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, one of the greatest personalities of ancient India. Megasthenes was a keen observer of men and events, and he used his opportunities well. Unfortunately his work, which was a record of his travels in India, is lost; but quotations from this lost work, found in the writings of Greek classical writers have preserved for us some of the information he gathered. This information of theoretical reflection and practical observation,

# SOURCES OF INDIAN HISTORY

## SOURCES



confirms to a surprising degree the picture we obtain from Kauṭilya, and is thus of great help in building up the history of the Mauryas on sure foundations.

Fa Hien, Hiuen Tsang, and I Tsing are immortal names in the annals of Chinese Buddhism. These names are also of great importance for us. Fa Hien came to India in the early years of the 5th century A.D. in search of Buddhist texts. Two centuries later came Hiuen Tsang on the same quest, and he was followed later by I Tsing. All the three Chinese pilgrims wrote interesting travel-diaries in which they set out their observations on the customs and manners of the people of our country, the land they had come to in search of Buddhist scriptures. Of the three, Hiuen Tsang is the most helpful. Fa Hien and I Tsing were much too interested in Buddhism to spare much thought on what was happening in the country at that time. Fa Hien came to India when the great Chandragupta II, Vikramāditya, was on the throne, but he does not so much as mention this great ruler's name. Hiuen Tsang, on the other hand, gives us a detailed description of some events in the life of Harṣa, whom he had the privilege of meeting. In addition to country-wide travels, Hieun Tsang also stayed at the famous Buddhist university of Nālandā, and his description of this seat of learning is remarkable for its fulness of detail and warmth of feeling.

Ancient India has produced very little biographical literature. The most prominent example is the *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇa. But the mass of mythological, romantic, and folk literature is very large indeed. The works of Bhāsa, Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, and Bhāravī, as well as collections of folk-tales like *Pañcatantra*, *Hitopadeśa* and *Kathāsaritsāgara*, and the Pāli *Jātakas* throw immense light on the social and economic conditions of the times during which these works were composed.

Our second main group of historical sources is archæological material in the form of artifacts and pottery of the prehistoric man and the great monuments like those of Sanchi and Barhut, Ellora and Ajanta, Mahabalipuram, Nasik and Karle. Ancient inscriptions and coins are of the greatest value, for without them it would be well nigh impossible to reconstruct any trustworthy history. For some phases of history, inscriptions are our only source. Aśoka would have been a shadowy figure without his edicts, and Samudra Gupta but a name without the Allahabad pillar inscription. The coins of the Guptas are a joy to behold, and their emblems and titles contribute significantly to a richer understanding on our part of the personalities under whose orders these coins were minted.

These are our sources then, and a word here will not be out of place as to their relative worth. Inscriptions and coins should be regarded as the primary material. They have their limitations, for many inscriptions are fragmentary and others suffer from exaggeration. But, by and large, the inscriptions are quite trustworthy. The *Purāṇas* and the *Vamsas* help us in tracing a definite order of antecedence and sequence through the maze of names of emperors and princelings in ancient India. But caution is necessary in their use as means of arriving at historical truth. The *Purāṇas* suffer from a Brāhmaṇical bias, while the *Vamsas* are more enthusiastically Buddhist than historical discretion would allow. To that extent their worth is vitiated. The secular literature, excepting biography, is secondary material, more useful for understanding social and economic conditions than for constructing a strictly historical narrative in which political events necessarily have the first place. The accounts of foreign travellers are valuable documents, deserving deep study; barring minor points, they are, as a general rule, trustworthy. The religious literature is of little direct use for political history, but certain sections thereof, as in the case of the Buddhist literature, contain an amount of reliable historical information. Much of the history of pre-Mauryan Magadha, for instance, can only be written with the help of Buddhist literature. In this literature the central figure is that of Gautama the Buddha who is credited with the happy knack of indulging in discussions with contemporary kings. The *R̥g Veda* provides incidental material on contemporary events like the Battle of the Ten Kings, but such information is disappointingly meagre. It would not do, however, to blame these works for their lack of historical information. They are more concerned with the great deeds of the gods than the petty squabbles of men, and are not to be expected to describe human events when they have divine attributes to hymn.

Such, then, are the materials by the aid of which we have to reconstruct the life-story of ancient India in conflict, in unity, or in creation. They are not as full as we might wish; but neither are they meagre. Using them judiciously and with an understanding of their spirit, we will be able to follow the march of the ancient Indian nation through the course of the centuries and the rise and fall of empires.

## II

### THE HUNTING GROUP

**I**N widely scattered areas like Baluchistan and Sind, the river valleys of Gujarat and the South, archæologists have, from time to time and after patient and diligent search, come across bits of stone crudely shaped into knives, choppers and axe-heads. At a cursory glance these pieces of stone can hardly be distinguished from other bits of stone. But the flaking of their edges is a sure indication that a human hand worked on it. These are the artifacts of the prehistoric Indian man, telling us that millennia ago men lived and worked in this country. Whether man was "born" here in India itself or came to this country from outside we have no means of knowing precisely, but the probability cannot be ruled out that man learned to walk erect on the Indian soil itself. The land as he found it then must have been far different from what it is today. There must have been dense jungles and marshy tracts, with the beds of the great rivers broader and higher than what they became in later times. What with fearsome beasts constantly on the prowl, it must have been, indeed, a bleak existence. Man at this stage was a hunter and a food-gatherer. Quite by chance one day he must have hit an approaching animal with a stone, and so discovered a missile, the use of which, he later learnt, could be controlled by a sling. After killing an animal he must have found a sharp chip of rock a convenient instrument to cut open the carcass, and thus was discovered the knife. A chance use of a part of a branch of a tree must have led to the invention of the wooden club. Then, instead of relying on the chance find of a naturally sharp piece of rock, man set out to make one himself by chipping off the edges of a small stone, and thus were made the first knives, axes, and choppers.

A comparison of the various tools made by prehistoric man gives us a clue to his progress in the art of living. These stages of man's progress have been described as palæolithic and neolithic. Palæolith means "old stone", and the word is used to describe the stage when man made stone tools which were rough and unpolished. Neolith means "new" stone, and it refers to that prehistoric phase when man polished his tools, showing a better appreciation of the material and its function. These tools are of three broad varieties, according to the way the tool is made. The first was made by the

“core” method, by which a tool was made by flaking or chipping away portions of a piece of rock till it received the required shape. The second was the “flake” method by which a large flake was first detached from a rock and then fashioned into a tool. The third is called the “chopper-chopping” tool, found in North India. This industry is allied to the flake group, but it also comprises tools designed as choppers. The core and flake industries of the palæolithic age are found in both northern and southern India. These prehistoric tools were made from quartzite, and have the form of knives, choppers, axe-heads, and digging instruments. The basis of human subsistence in this age was hunting and food-gathering. Men must have grouped together to go hunting and while they were away, the women must have gone about in the forest searching for berries and edible roots. The population lived in small groups of hunting families or tribes constantly on the move in search of game, spending the intervals between their peregrinations in caves. The dress must have been made from strips of skins obtained from the animals which were primarily hunted for food.

Man lived in this fashion, constantly engaged in a struggle to find food, and learning painfully through experience. But progress was slow, and the old stone age was characterised by “a monumental inaction over millennia”. In course of time he started showing greater care and attention in the making of his tools, which were now polished. As a hunter and a food-gatherer he was entirely dependent on his environment. His was a nomadic life, spent mostly in fear and hunger. He had already learnt the use of fire and had started making pottery for use in his “kitchen”, for cooking food and storing it if anything was left over from the day’s meal.

Then came the first revolution in the life of man. It was his discovery that he could domesticate certain animals, for instance, the dog, who could be very useful to him in his hunting. He also discovered that instead of following the wild animals over hills and through forests, he could lure them into enclosures and later, after domesticating them, turn them into beasts of burden, or also use them as food whenever necessary. This was a great discovery for, with it, man ceased to follow the animal and instead began to lead it around. And when the hunter stumbled upon this art of domesticating animals, about the same time the food-gatherers among them (very probably women) understood the secret of the process of growing a plant. It is also possible that grain was first grown to attract animals into an enclosure for the purpose of taming them after capture. This discovery was of tremendous signi-

ficance in the life of man for, thereby, he learnt to control his environment to some extent, instead of living in utter fear of it. He needed no longer to go about searching for edible grass and berries and roots, for he could now sow seeds and wait for the harvest. It meant that he could abandon his wandering existence and settle down in one place, build a "house", and raise a family. This particular developmental process is not very easy to trace in India, but all the available evidence leads us to believe that the art of agriculture was introduced into this country from Western Asia. The earliest crops must have been barley and wheat. As regards rice, it seems probable that "rice-cultivation began earlier in India than it did in China, and that the knowledge reached the latter country by way of Yangtze, to make its appearance in the Chinese Bronze Age about 2000 B.C., the neolithic crop in North China having been millet". In Western Asia there is clear evidence that by 3000 B.C. agriculture had already been established as a means of production of the wherewithal of life. The earliest agricultural communities in India had at that remote time settled in the now bleak and deserted areas of North-Western India which then had a plentiful rainfall. With a harvest at hand and an animal tied to a post, life had begun to be comfortable and secure, and this feeling is reflected in the pottery of the period. There is a lively sense of colour and life in the patterns drawn on the surface of the pots and pans of this age. Red, yellow, brown, purplish grey and orange are the colours firmly fixed upon the surface of the pottery, first turned on the wheel and then carefully fired in the kiln.

The next revolution in the life of man was the discovery of metal. Prehistoric man found that certain peculiar stones we now call metal ores could, if heated sufficiently, be turned into matter which could be hammered out or cast in any form. This then could be made into a blade or a receptacle. As Stuart Piggott says, "This recognition of the relationship between copper ore and the metal is one with far-reaching consequences: it is the basis of chemistry and all metallurgy." But the use of metals for tool-making could have only been a long process, and in the transitional period both stone and metal tools must have been in use simultaneously, as for example, in the chalcolithic age of Mohenjodaro.

The domestication of animals, agriculture, and the use of metals together brought about a complete transformation in the life of man. He gradually gave up his wandering habits and settled down into agricultural communities. And with this began the process of division of labour, leading later on to the rise of

occupation classes, the organization of work under social controls, an increased security, and the release of individual energy for creative work.

The change in social organization was reflected in the ideas of morality and religion that were developing, which now became more elaborate, with belief in numerous gods and goddesses, spirits and deities. Turner has rightly described this period as "the only important period of social and cultural change between the old stone age and modern times" for the masses of people. The changes led to the foundation of enduring societies which could fashion their own instruments of cultural diffusion and transmission from generation to generation. Therefore, "in the main, until the rise of machine production and industrial cities, all social and cultural developments were merely superimposed upon peasants and nomads, who lived, worked, believed, and died in the manner of their ancestors, generations without end. Upon the continued performance of routines of life organised in neolithic achievements, rested the order, stability, and wealth of all subsequent cultures. In these routines was taken up that burden of labour in the fields, on the plains, and at the simple crafts which was to be the lot of common men until very recent times. Even in the most advanced industrial nations, it should be recognised, the masses of the population are only a few generations away from the organisation of life that came into existence at least seven thousand years ago".

If prehistoric man was alive to the difficulties of living on earth, he was equally conscious of the needs of life after death, in which he believed. He seems to have evolved an elaborate ritual of burial in keeping with this belief. In many places in South India strange structures of stone called megaliths or dolmens have been found. Such a structure is a funerary edifice built of huge stone slabs and covered with a stone with a circle of stones surrounding it. The dead body was generally interred in an earthen jar, which was then let into a pit and half-filled with earth. The dead man's tools and weapons, as also grain, were placed in the grave which was then closed with a stone slab. However, it is rather difficult to relate these megaliths in India to the remote antiquity of the prehistoric age. The case with the rock paintings of Singapore, which previously had been claimed as belonging to the Upper Palæolithic Age, is similar, and modern opinion is not prepared to ascribe them to a time earlier than just a century or so before Christ. Prehistoric research in India is still in its infancy, and hence the material at our disposal is disappointingly meagre. It was only recently that Indian archæologists like Dr. Sankalia car-



ried out scientific expeditions and discovered microlithic sites in the Narmada and Sabarmati valleys. Bruce Foote laid the foundation of prehistory in India with his collection of antiquities now preserved in the Madras Museum. Sporadic efforts have been made off and on, but have added little to our existing information. No skeletal remains of prehistoric man have yet been found in India, and it is only after years of digging and study at the proper sites or through accidental discoveries that our picture can become fuller. However, in the meantime, with progress in prehistoric archæology our horizons are widening, and we might claim that the outline of the picture is sufficiently distinct.

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