

A HISTORY OF

ANCIENT
INDIA

For UPSC and State Civil Services Examinations

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>	Evolution of Humans	2.6
<i>Dedication</i>	<i>x</i>	When did Humans Begin to Live in India?	2.7
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>xi</i>	Palaeolithic Age in India	2.9
<i>Reading Map</i>	<i>xii</i>	Mesolithic Age	2.11
		Neolithic Age	2.15
Chapter 1 Understanding Ancient Indian Sources	1.1	Chalcolithic Farming Cultures in India at a Glance	2.22
Literary Sources	1.2	Subsistence Pattern of Chalcolithic Cultures	2.24
Religious Literature	1.6	Chalcolithic Age: Transition from Pre to Protohistoric Period	2.25
Smriti Literature	1.9	<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	2.27
Buddhist Literature	1.13		
Jaina Literature	1.15	Chapter 3 Indus Civilization	3.1
Kavya Literature	1.17	A Civilization in Totality	3.2
Early Indian Historical Tradition	1.19	Discovery, Origin, Chronology and Extent	3.4
Foreign Account	1.20	Origin and Chronology of the Civilization	3.4
Greek Account	1.21	Detailed Analysis	3.5
Latin Account	1.22	Extent and Geographical Distribution	3.8
Chinese Travellers' Accounts	1.22	Characteristics of Indus Settlements	3.10
Tibetan Account	1.24	Clear Evidence of Centralized Planning	3.10
Archaeological Sources	1.24	Definite Link Between Urban and Rural Centres	3.13
Epigraphy (Inscriptions)	1.25	Subsistence Pattern	3.15
Numismatics	1.28	Agriculture and Animal Husbandry	3.15
Monuments	1.30	Craft Production and Trade	3.19
<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	1.31	Society, Religion and Religious Beliefs	3.24
		Decline of the Civilization	3.25
Chapter 2 Prehistoric Cultures in India	2.1	<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	3.31
Prehistoric India	2.2		
Earth and Geological Formation of India	2.3		
Formation of the Himalayas	2.4		
Western India and Deccan	2.5		
Alluvial Basins of Indus and Ganga–Brahmaputra	2.5		

Chapter 4 The Aryans and The Vedic Age	4.1	Bindusara (297 BCE–272 BCE)	6.10
General Survey	4.2	Ashoka	6.10
Sources of Study	4.2	The Mauryan Administration	6.23
Literary Sources—The Vedic Texts	4.2	Central Administration	6.24
Archaeological Findings	4.7	Municipal Administration	6.25
Comparison of Literary and Archaeological Sources	4.7	The Army	6.25
Who Were The Aryans?	4.8	Law and Justice	6.26
Geographical Extent	4.10	Provincial Administration	6.26
Transition from Rig Vedic to Later Vedic Phases	4.11	Local Administration	6.26
The Vedic Age: A Comparative Study	4.12	Municipal Administration	6.27
Early Vedic Society	4.12	Judicial Administration	6.27
Early Vedic Religion	4.14	Socio-Economic Pattern of the Mauryan India	6.29
Early Vedic Polity	4.17	Mauryan Economy	6.29
<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	4.20	Social Organization Under the Mauryas	6.30
		Relationship Between Mauryan Polity, Economy and Society	6.31
		The Decline of the Mauryan Empire	6.33
		Ashoka's Responsibility for the Downfall of the Empire	6.33
Chapter 5 The State Formation and The Rise of Heterodox Sects (600 BCE–400 BCE)	5.1	A Case of Despotic Rule	6.34
Early Historic Period	5.2	Economic Factor	6.34
State Formation and Emergence of Cities	5.3	Mauryan Art and Architecture	6.35
Magadha Empire	5.11	Architecture	6.35
Persian Invasions	5.13	Sculpture	6.38
Alexander's Invasion of India	5.14	Foreign Influence on Mauryan Art	6.40
The Impact of Alexander's Invasion	5.15	<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	6.41
Rise of Heterodox Sects	5.16		
Socio-Economic Milieu for the Religious Upheavals	5.17	Chapter 7 Contact with the Outside World: The Post-Mauryan Period	7.1
Jainism and Its Philosophy	5.21	Post-Mauryan Period—A Period of Transition	7.2
Buddhism and Its Philosophy	5.24	Political Developments	7.3
Differences between Jainism and Buddhism	5.31	Dynasties of External Origin	7.5
<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	5.33	Economic Condition	7.6
		Social Conditions	7.10
		Religion	7.11
		Literature	7.13
		Art and Architecture	7.15
		<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	7.19
Chapter 6 Mauryan Age: The First Empire (300 BCE–200 BCE)	6.1		
Sources	6.2		
Origin of Mauryas	6.5		
Chandragupta Maurya (321–297 BCE)	6.6		

Chapter 8 The Gupta and Post-Gupta Periods	8.1	Science and Technology in India	10.6
Political History	8.2	Astronomy	10.6
Origin of the Dynasty	8.3	Mathematics	10.7
Samudragupta's Campaigns as per <i>Prayag Prashasti</i>	8.5	Medicine	10.7
Administration	8.7	Metallurgy	10.8
Social-Economic Changes	8.10	Geography	10.8
Economic Changes:		Scientists of Ancient India	10.9
Fourth–Seventh Centuries CE	8.12	Baudhayana	10.9
Religious Life	8.14	Aryabhata	10.10
Art and Patronage	8.16	Brahmagupta	10.10
Literature	8.17	Bhaskaracharya	10.11
The Gupta Age: The Myth of the Golden Age	8.20	Mahaviracharya	10.11
<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	8.22	Kanada	10.11
		Varahamihira	10.11
		Nagarjuna	10.12
		Sushruta	10.12
		Charak	10.13
		Yoga and Patanjali	10.13
Chapter 9 Developments in Ancient South India: The Sangam Age and The Megalithic Cultures	9.1	Chapter 11 Society, Religion, Art and Architecture: An Overview	11.1
Rise of Tamil Dynasties	9.2	Society in Ancient India	11.2
The Sangam Age	9.2	Puruṣārtha	11.2
The Sangam Literature	9.4	Social Institutions and Practices	11.4
Political Conditions	9.6	Varnashrama System	11.4
Administrative Systems	9.6	Evolution of Jatis	11.6
Economic Conditions	9.7	Ashram or the Stages of Life	11.6
Social Conditions	9.10	Marriage	11.8
The Megalithic Cultures	9.14	Samskaras	11.10
Dating and Spread	9.15	Ancient Indian Religions	11.11
The Iron Age Megalithic Culture of South India	9.15	Brahmanism	11.11
Categories of the Megaliths	9.15	Highlights of Vaishnavism and Vaishnava Cults	11.13
Subsistence Pattern	9.16	Highlights of Saivism	11.14
Social Life	9.19	Moderate Saiva Sects	11.15
Religious Beliefs	9.19	Highlights of Shaktism	11.15
<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	9.21	Highlights of Tantrism	11.16
Chapter 10 Education in Ancient India	10.1	Six Orthodox Schools of Indian Philosophical Systems	11.17
Vedic Period	10.2		
Mauryan and Post-Mauryan Period	10.3		
Gupta and Post-Gupta Period	10.4		
Aim of Education	10.5		
Subjects Studied	10.5		
Language	10.6		

Highlights of Buddhism	11.19	Chapter 12 Early Medieval India	
Highlights of Jainism	11.21	(750 CE–1200 CE)	12.1
Highlights of Ancient Art and Architecture	11.24	Understanding Early Medieval India	12.2
Stupa Construction	11.24	Nature of Polity	12.3
Chaitya Construction	11.26	Feudal State Formation	12.3
Vihara Construction	11.27	Political History of North India	12.7
Brahmanical and Jaina Caves	11.28	Social Change	12.18
Structural Temple Architecture	11.28	Proliferation of Castes	12.19
Paintings	11.33	Changes in Economy	12.21
<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	11.36	Urbanization	12.23
		Cultural Developments	12.23
		<i>Previous Year's Questions: How to Approach</i>	12.29
		Photo Credits	P.1

Preface

For UPSC aspirants, preparing for the Ancient History has always been a tedious task, as there is too much to study and plethora of textbook to consult from. This book on **A History of Ancient India** aims at not only to help the students to grasp the topics well, but also to provide them with a right approach to write answers correctly and score well in Mains as well as in Prelims.

This book is a breakthrough in the arena of understanding the Ancient History, as it breaks the pre-conceived notion of History being monotonous and complex.

The book has been designed keeping in mind the pattern of UPSC examination's changing trend and pattern. The sole purpose of this book is to help UPSC aspirants to be aided with an exam preparatory text that has easy explanations of the concepts along with the right approach to derive at the method to answer the questions.

Salient Features:

1. Content is coherent and strictly in accordance with the UPSC syllabus.
2. Previous years' questions are tagged chapter-wise and are discussed in a novel and systematic manner through flowcharts and diagrams.
3. Every chapter is minutely detailed with required pictures and tables.
4. A special section at the end of each chapter is designed to provide the Right Approach to answer Questions to handle Main examination.
5. One-stop solution for ancient history preparation as significant parts of art and culture are also beautifully woven in this book.

The chapters are partitioned and sub-categorized for comprehensive information, followed by selected citations linked to the text for review and revisiting, raising relevant questions for reconsideration and discussion. Also included are simplified maps with topographical and geographical history relevant to the subject matter of the chapters. Numerous images included in the chapters illustrate the grandeur and greatness of ancient India.

Designed primarily for the students of UPSC and State Civil Services Examination, the book can prove of equal help to the students of History at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Wish you all Success!

Ajeet Jha

Dedication

To my late grandparents
who taught me to become
rational and tolerant

About the Author

Ajeet Jha is an Assistant Professor in History at Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi. He obtained his Post-Graduate and PhD degree from the Department of History, University of Delhi. He has been a dedicated teacher in addition to his relentlessly pursued research, which resulted in publication of his articles in reputed journals and proceedings. He has recently co-authored a book, titled *Changing Complexions of Delhi: A Study of Jhuggi-Jhopadi Clusters and Cultural Transition*, which was a part of Delhi University Innovation Project. His other areas of interest include Religion, Regional History and Culture.



Reading Map

A HISTORY OF ANCIENT INDIA

Prehistoric Period—Stone Age, Paleolithic Age, Mesolithic Age, Neolithic Age, Chalcolithic Age (Chapters 1 and 2)

- Classification of Prehistoric period
- The mode of living of people

Indus Valley Civilization/ Harappan Civilization (2500 BCE–1500 BCE) (Chapters 2 and 3)

- Lifestyle—Social, Economic (agriculture, trade and commerce), Religious and Cultural activities
- Important Harappan sites and its significance
- Script and language
- Art and Crafts—seals, pottery, etc.
- Why did the civilization decline?

Vedic Period (1500 BCE–1000 BCE) (Chapters 4 and 5)

- Society (people and their lifestyle)—family, marriage, status of women, caste system or social divisions.
- Economic Life and Political Organisation
- Culture and Religion
- Literature during Vedic times—Vedas, Upanishads, Dharma Shastras, Puranas and Six systems of Philosophy
- Important Gods worshipped and their significance to Vedic people
- Differences between Early and Later Vedic Society and lifestyles followed

Buddhism and Jainism (Chapters 5 and 6)

- Reasons for the growth of such religious movements
- Buddha and Mahavira—their Beliefs (in Nirvana, Law of Karma etc.) their Contributions, Teachings, Philosophy and Literature
- Important Events during their Life (Enlightenment); Buddhist and Jaina Councils
- Types of Buddhism—Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana (their beliefs and differences among them)
- Two Sects of Jainism—Svetambara and Digambara; Ajivikas
- Differences between Jainism and Buddhism
- Causes of Decline of Buddhism and Jainism

Kingdoms/Empires during the Ancient Period (Chapter 6–12)

- Empires and Dynastic rule—The Mauryan Empire, Guptas, Sunga, Kanva dynasties', Satavahanas, Rastrakutas, Pallavas, Cholas, Cheras, Pandyas, Chalukyas
- The rise of the Empires—causes, impact
- Important Rulers—Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka (Ashoka's Dhamma, Edicts and important sites where they were found) and their contribution to the society, art and culture
- The Economic and Social Conditions during the rule
- Art and Architecture
- Literature—Famous literary works—Kalidasa's '*Abhigyanashakuntalam*' etc.
- Development of Science and technology—Aryabhatta's '*Suryasiddhanta*' etc.
- The Decline of the empires—causes
- Foreign travelers and their works Example: Chinese traveler Fa Hein's account of India during 5th century

Crack your History Paper by following these Thumb Rules:

- Keep a copy of a syllabus with you, no matter wherever you are.
- Study the topics from our book but grasp the concept with a matured graduate brain.
- Get familiar with all the topics and sub-topics by writing them many times; they should be strongly etched in your memory.
- The assessment of your answers to the questions in the Mains is based on your ability to put-forth your point-of-view, that is original yet logical. So, state the facts with assertion and intelligence.
- Revision is the key term when it comes to preparing for UPSC examinations. Read, write and practice as much as possible.
- UPSC has started picking terms such as *Purohita*, *Jana* or *Kula* and asking simple questions based on the term. So be prepared for these questions.
- Special importance should be given to Mauryan and Gupta's time. Therefore, concentrate on these two, at length.

Historical understanding of the past depends upon how we interpret historical data, and such data-based interpretations are the result of various evidence derived from the two major sources of history, i.e., literary and archaeological. Though literary sources include all kinds of texts—written and oral, and archaeological sources include all tangible, material remains, yet all remains of the past, be it literary manuscripts or writings inscribed on images, inscriptions or coins may constitute sources of history no matter whether they are conventionally divided into literary (religious and non-religious/secular texts, foreign accounts, etc.) sources and archaeological (artefacts, coins, inscriptions, all kinds of material remains) sources.

A careful analysis of the sources is key to understanding history of the past. Since both literary and archaeological sources have their own respective potential vis-à-vis limitations, neither of the categories can be taken for granted. The corroboration of evidence from texts and archaeology is generally considered important for an inclusive and comprehensive reconstruction of the past, though given the inherent differences in the nature of literary and archaeological data, it is often difficult to integrate them in totality to present a coherent picture of the past.

OBJECTIVES

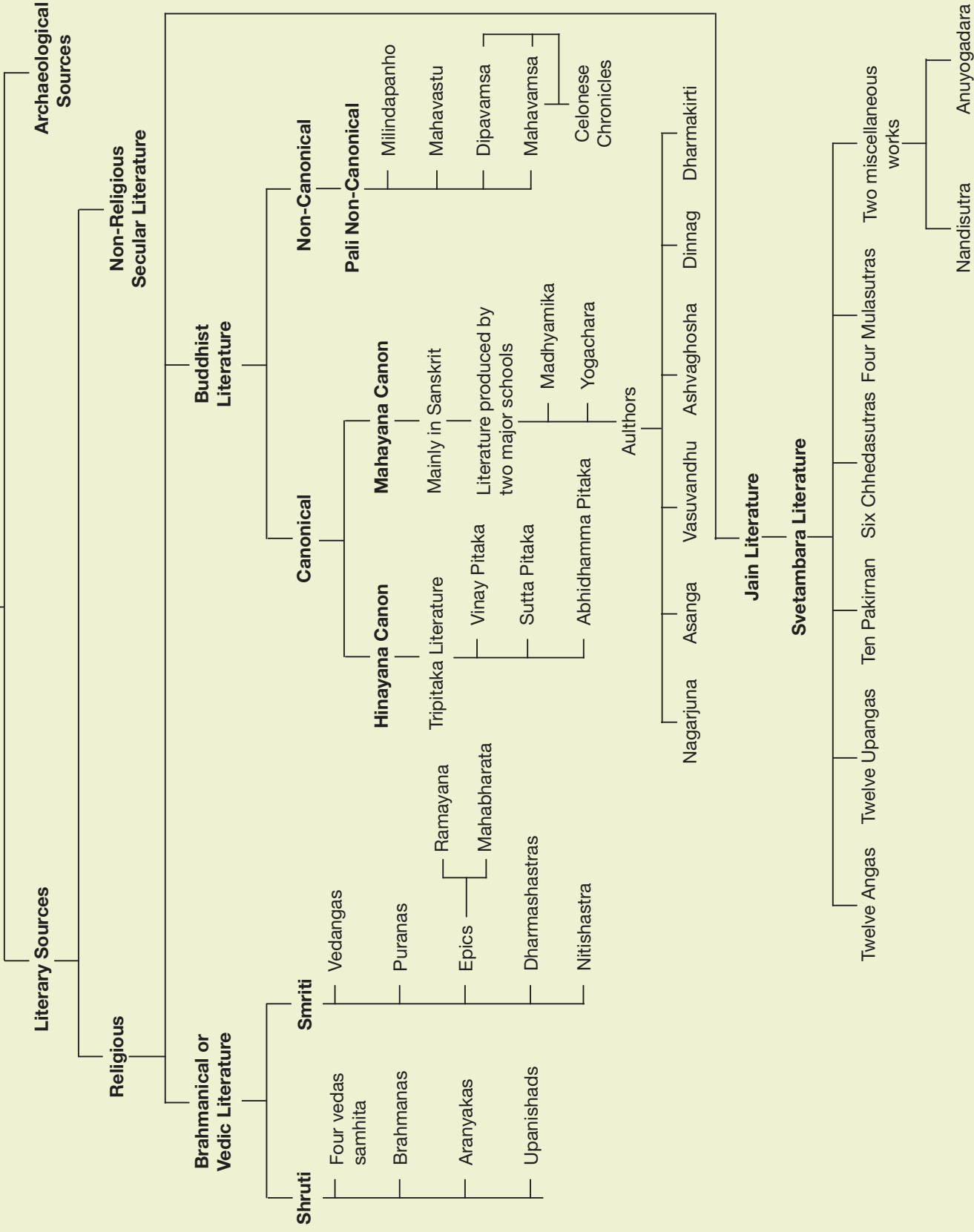
After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Learn about twin epics in Sanskrit—*Ramayana and Mahabharata*
- Develop an understanding of religious and non-religious Indian texts
- Understand the origin and importance of Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads
- Learn about the Greek, Chinese and Tibetan travellers who visited India
- Explain how archaeological remains such as monuments, coins, pottery and pillars help in interpreting the stories about the people who used them
- Correlate evidence from texts and archaeology for an inclusive understanding of Ancient India.

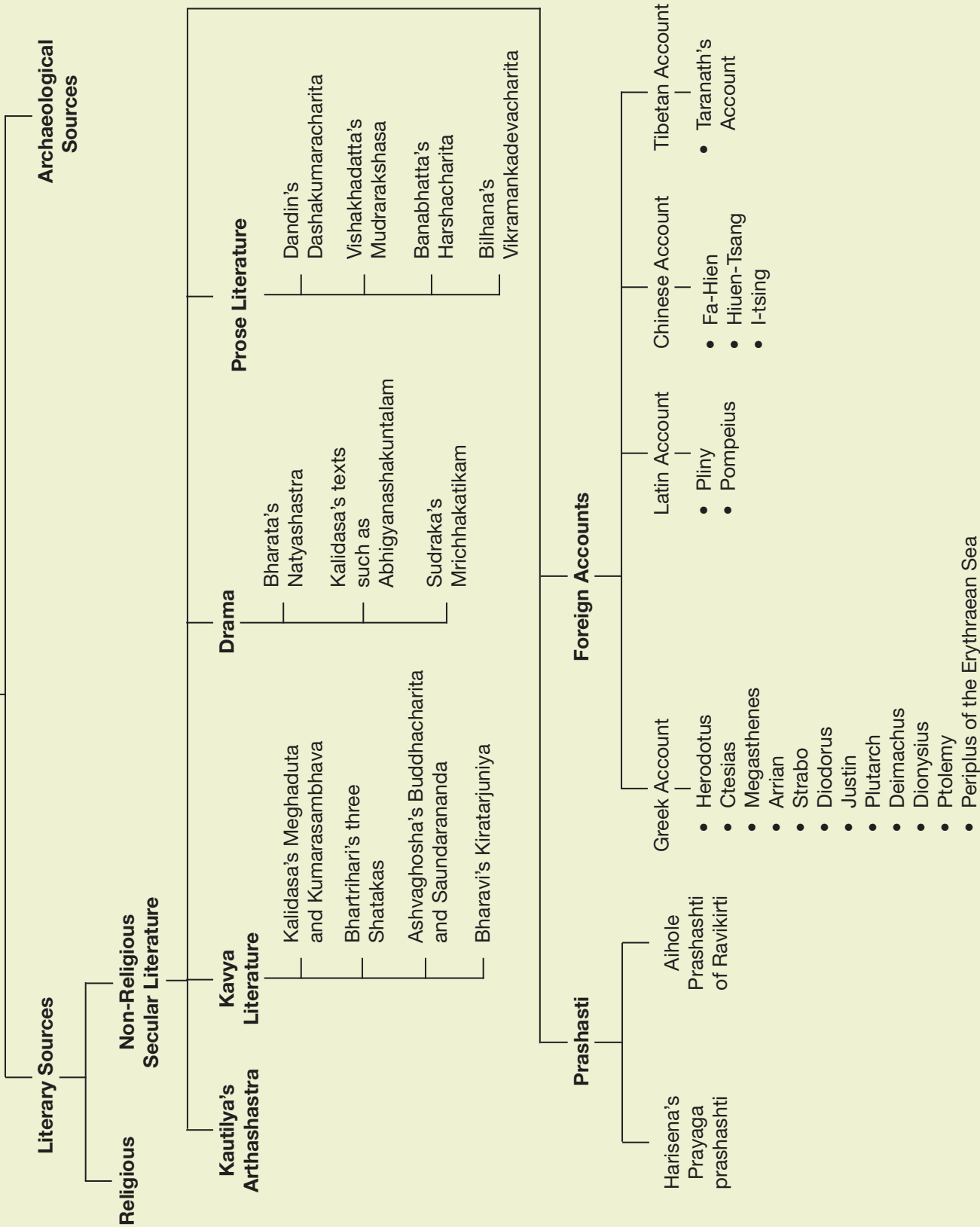
LITERARY SOURCES

Ancient Indian texts are generally divided into religious and non-religious texts. This division might appear misleading to others with regard to description of the term 'religion', especially while making a distinction between the literary sources. The English term 'religion' emphasizes upon belief, practices, rigidity and distinct religious identities which have a definite, exclusive boundaries. On the other hand, the Sanskrit term '*dharma*' does not attach such meaning. It precisely denotes a set of things such as codes of conduct, social practice, forms and objects of worship including rituals, philosophical ideas, etc., that people are supposed to follow. In other words it suggests a particular way of life. It appears that ancient Indians did not distinguish between the religious and secular domains, and perhaps that is the reason why we witness a fine interplay of both religious and non-religious contents and themes in the majority of ancient Indian texts.

Sources of Ancient Indian History

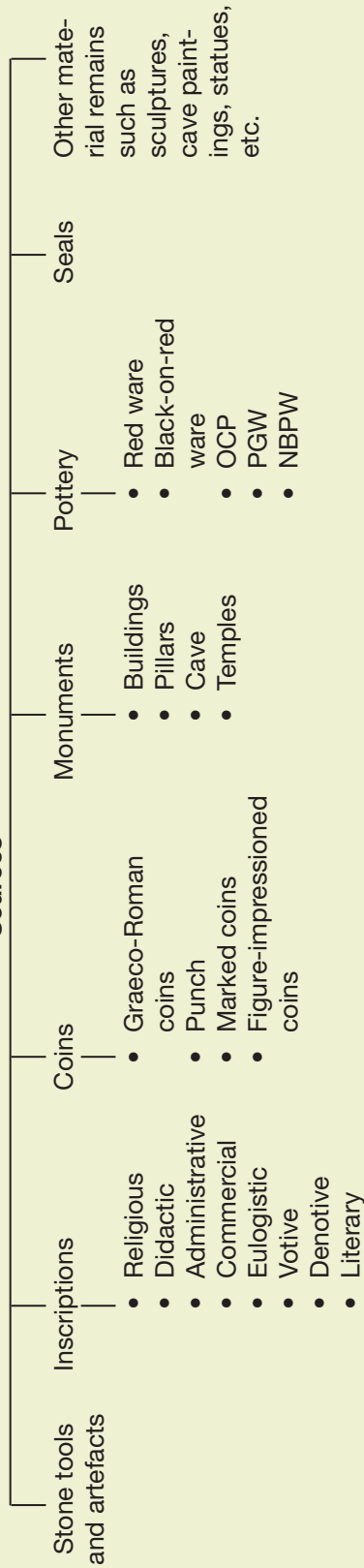


Sources of Ancient Indian History (Continued)



Sources of Ancient Indian History (Continued)

Archaeological Sources





MAHABHARATA — THE EPIC RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

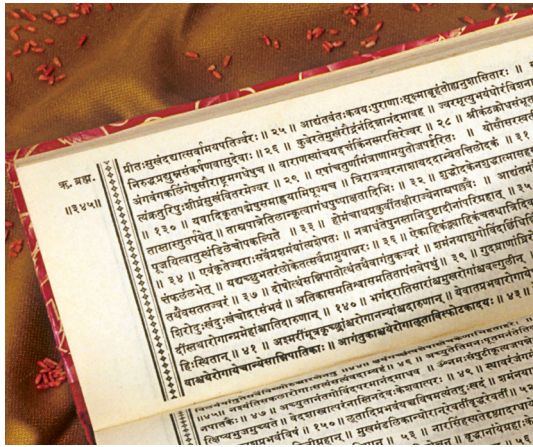
Literary texts do have historical contexts as they are produced and circulated in definite time periods. With regard to our ancient Indian religious texts, it may be said that some of these oldest texts present a complex and refracted image of the past as they were not primarily meant to be read but to be recited, heard and performed. They, in fact, were passed on orally for generations before they were available as written manuscripts in a much later period.

Religious Literature

Vedic Literature

The entire corpus of Vedic literature is broadly divided into *Shruti* (that which has been, heard’) literature and *smriti* (that which has been ‘remembered’) literature. *Shruti* literature consists of the four *Vedas*, *Samhitas*, *Brahmana* texts, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* whereas the *smriti* literature includes the *Vedangas*, *Puranas*, epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata), *Dharmastras* and *Nitishastras*.

Shruti Literature



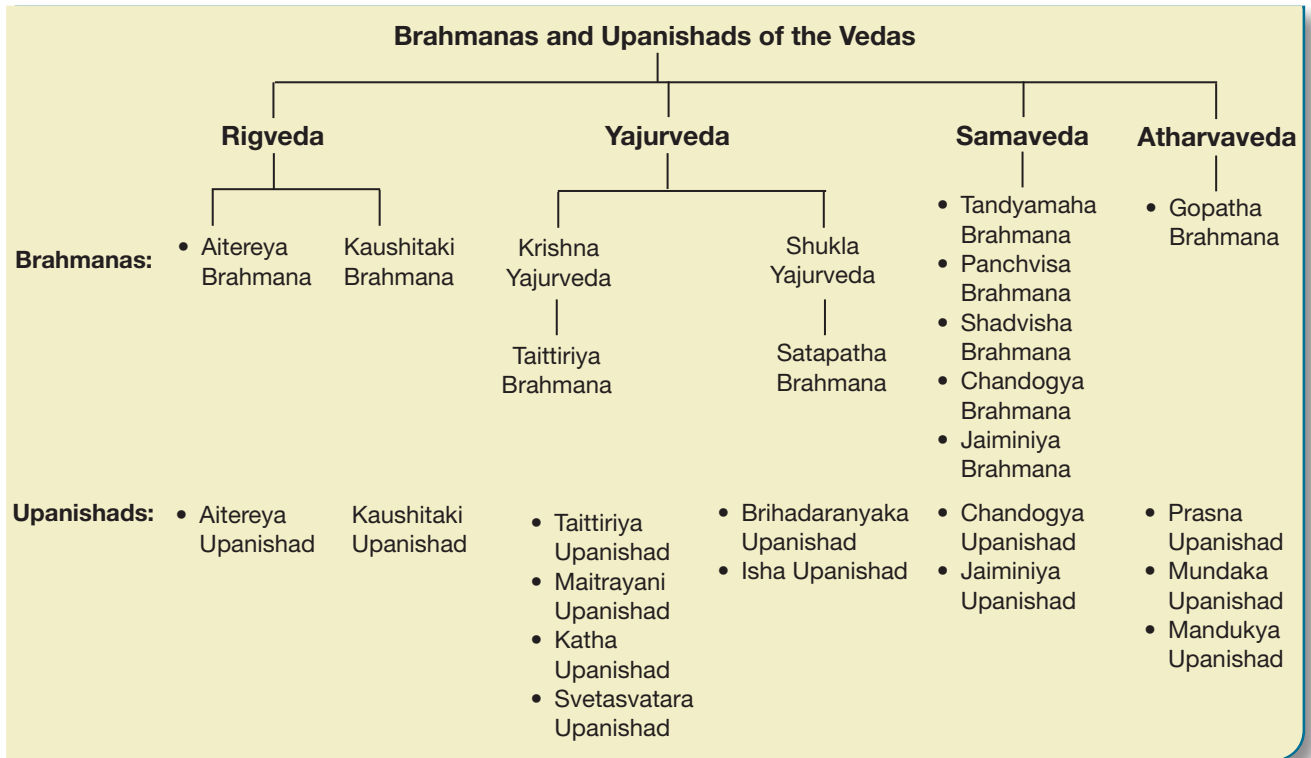
VEDIC LITERATURE

The word ‘veda’ is derived from the root ‘vid’ which means to know. It is applied to a branch of literature which is declared to be sacred knowledge or divine revelation, that is, *Shruti*. *Samhitas* are collections of hymns sung in the praise of various gods. They are the most essential part of the Vedic literature. They are four in number—Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda Samhitas.

The **Rig Veda** is also known as knowledge of the hymns of Praise. It consists of a collection of 1,028 poems grouped into 10 ‘circles’ (mandalas). 1017 hymns (*suktas*) and supplemented by 11 other called *valakhilyas*. It is divided into ten books or *mandalas*. The Rig Veda is the oldest and as well as the most important of all the *Samhitas*. Earliest *mandalas*, i.e., from book II to VII are called ‘family books’ as they are ascribed to particular families of sages or *rishis*. In *mandal* III, which was composed by Vishvamitra, we find the famous *Gayatri mantra*, addressed to the solar deity Savitri. The term ‘Harirupiya’ (resembling Harappa) finds mention in *mandala* VI, and the famous ‘Battle of Ten Kings’ is described in *mandala* VII. Book IX is dedicated to *soma*. Books I and X are later additions and the latter contains the famous Purusha sukta hymn, explaining the division of society into four *varnas*. The Rigvedic priest is known as *Hotri* (the invoker). Recently, the Rigveda has been included by the UNESCO in the list of World Human Literature.

The **Sama Veda** is the Knowledge of the Melodies (the name derived from *saman*, meaning a song or melody) consists of 1810 stanzas (except 75) taken from the Rig Veda. They were set to tune for the purpose of chanting by the *udgatri* priests at the soma sacrifice. It is called the book of chants, and the origins of Indian music are traced to it.

The Vedas present a multitude of gods, most of them related to natural forces such as storm, fire and wind.



THE 4 VEDAS AND THE 10 MAIN UPANISHADS

The **Yajur Veda** is the Knowledge of the Sacrificial formulae consists of various mantras (hymns) for the purpose of recitation and rules to be observed at the time of sacrifice. It is primarily a guide for the use of the *adhvaryu* priest who performed the ritual. The two royal ceremonies of *rajasuya* and *vajapeya* are mentioned for the first time in this Veda. In contrast to the first two which are in verse entirely, this one is in both verse and prose. It is divided into two parts—*Krishna* and *Shukla*.

The **Atharva Veda** is the knowledge of magic formulæ (Veda of the *atharvans* or the knowledge of magic formulas) contains charms and spells in verse to ward off evils and diseases. Believed to be the work of non-Aryans, its contents throw light on the beliefs and practices of the non-Aryans. It is divided into two parts—*Paippalada* and *Saunaka*.

Brahmanas are treatises relating to prayer and sacrificial ceremony. Each Veda has its own *Brahmana* text/texts attached to it. Their subject matter is ritual and the language is prose. In short, they deal with the science of sacrifice. The important Brahmanas are—*Aitareya*, *Kausitaki*, *Tandyamaha Brahmana*, *Jaiminiya*, *Taittiriya*, *Satapatha* and *Gopatha Brahmanas*. *Tandyamaha Brahmana*, is one of the oldest, and contains many legends, and includes the *Vratyastoma*, a ceremony through which people of non-Aryan stock could be admitted into the Aryan fold. But the most important as well as the most voluminous of all the Brahmanas is the *Satapatha Brahmana*. It provides us information about not only sacrifices and ceremonies but also theology, philosophy, manners and customs of the later Vedic period.

Aranyakas are called the forest books as they were composed mainly by hermits living in the forests for their pupils. These texts deal with mysticism and symbolism of sacrifice and priestly philosophy. The Aranyakas contain transitional material between the mythology and ritual of the Samhitas and Brahmanas on the one hand, and the philosophical speculations of the Upanishads on the other.

Upanishads

Upanishad, though literally means ‘to sit around *gurus*/teachers’, is colloquially understood as establishing connections and equivalences between things. The upanishadic thoughts emphasize upon the attainment of the ultimate knowledge. Upanishad that imparted knowledge was not the ordinary one; it was all-encompassing which was the key to liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Such a knowledge could only be imparted to deserving disciples as it was difficult to explain and comprehend. It could only be revealed through debate and discussions, using devices like stories and images among its seekers.

Of 108 Upanishads, only 12 are very important. They are: Aitareya, Kausitaki, Chandogya, Kena, Taittiriya, Katha, Svetasvatara, Brihadaranyaka (oldest), Isa, Mundaka, Prasna and Mandukya.

Upanishadic thoughts mainly revolve around the two fundamental concepts of *Brahma* and *Atman*. The Sanskrit term ‘Brahma’ comes from the root ‘brih’ which means to be strong and firm, and something that grants prosperity. It is in fact, the ultimate, imperishable reality pervading the universe. The term ‘Atman’ is the ultimate reality of the individual, i.e., the imperishable self. The reference of the term ‘maya’ or illusion (Shvetashvatara Upanishad) is defined in negative terms. It occurs in the human mind because of ‘avidya’ or ignorance, i.e., inability to realize oneness with Brahma which is the creative power of ‘Ishwar’ or God. Some of the Upanishads explain the doctrine of transmigration (freedom from a cycle of death and rebirth) by asserting that death and rebirth, which are connected with ‘avidya’ could be averted through attainment of ultimate knowledge. Hence, the objective of upanishadic thought is the realization of Brahma and liberation the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*) could only be achieved through knowledge or *jnana*.

Excerpts from Upanishads

Taittiriya Upanishad: *Satyam vada, Dharam chara, Matri devo bhava, Pitri devo bhava, Atithi devo bhava* (Speak the truth, Practice dharma, Treat your mother, father and guest as Lord).

Chandogya Upanishad: The significance of OM syllable is discussed—the chant of OM is the essence of all. *Ashrama* (stages of life) system is mentioned. The story of *satyakaram*, the son of Jabala is mentioned.

Katha Upanishad: ‘Rise, awake! Having obtained these boons’, understand them!’ This slogan was adopted by Swami Vivekanand for his Ramakrishna Mission. Conversation between father Vajasravasa and son Nachiketa.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: Longest of all *upanishads*.

Popular Verses: *Aham brahmasmi, asato ma sadgamaya..., om shantih, shantih shantih’.*

Stories of King Janaka of Mithila and dialogues between sage Yajnavalkya and two learned ladies, Gargi and Maitreyi.

Mundaka Upanishad: *Satyameva Jayate* mentioned.

The Upanishadic principles embody the epitome of the Vedic thoughts. The final culmination of Upanishadic thought, interpreted in various Upanishads in the later period is the philosophy of **Vedanta** (end or culmination of Vedic thoughts) or Uttara-Mimamsa. They reflect different ideas about *atman*, *brahma* and the world, and statements such as *tat tvam asi* (you are that), *aham brahma asmi* (I am brahma) and *brahma atma aikyam* (non-dualism of brahma and atman) can be interpreted in different ways. Bhagavad Gita incorporated some aspects of upanishadic philosophy with a doctrine of advocating righteous action (*karma*). One of the prominent scholars of Vedanta philosophy was Shankaracharya of ninth century who propounded the theory of monistic *advait vedanta*. According to this theory, there is only a single unified reality—*brahma* and everything else appears to be a myth including the world. On the other hand, there exists a pantheistic stand too, in upanishadic thought which identifies the universe with *brahma*.

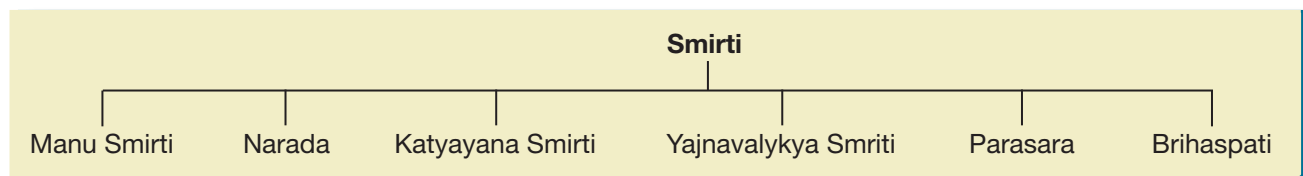
The Upanishads are also seen as anti-sacrifice or anti-Brahmin. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* mentions that the performance of sacrifice leads to ‘world of fathers’ but knowledge leads to ‘world of Gods’. There are references to Brahmins being instructed by Kshatriya kings (such as Ajatashatru, Ashvapati, Prabahana, etc.) in imparting the knowledge of *brahma*. Despite these references, there are Upanishads, included in Vedic corpus as part of *Shruti*, suggest that Upanishads do not reject sacrifice, rather they employ the vocabulary of sacrifice to new ends. There are symbolic representations of rituals in Upanishads.

In a nutshell, Upanishads are philosophical texts dealing with topics like the universal soul, the absolute, the individual self, the origin of the world, the mysteries of nature, and so on. They mark the culmination of Indian thought in the Vedic period. They indirectly criticize the rituals and lay stress on the value of right belief and knowledge.

Though *Shruti* literature comprises a religious literature, references to historicity and historical events in them can be discerned. Book VII of Rig Veda refers to a battle of ten kings over the question of the distribution of water of river Ravi (*parushni*). In this battle, Sudas defeated his enemies who had confederated against him. Moreover, *Shruti* literature forms an important part of the Brahmanical traditions. It reflects their religious beliefs and practices, apart from various facets of their social life. As a source of history, these texts are used for collecting information about the life and condition of the people in parts of north-western and northern India during the second and first millennia BCE.

Smriti Literature

Vedangas and Sutra Literature: There are six Vedangas: *Siksha* (Phonetics), *Kalpa* (Rituals), *Vyakarana* (Grammar), *Nirukta* (Etymology), *Chandas* (Metrics) and *Jyotisha* (Astronomy).



In contrast to the Vedic literature which is considered as *Shruti* or divine revelation, the Vedangas are called *smriti* or literature handed down by tradi-