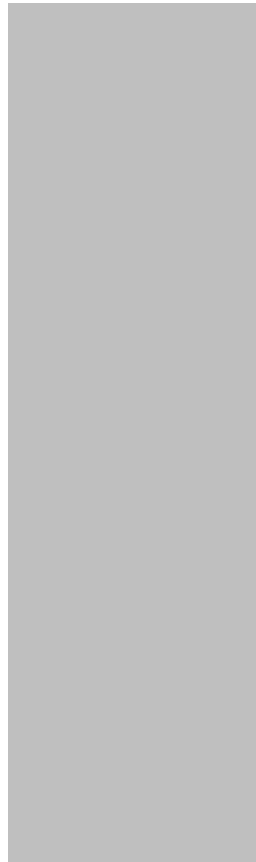


THE IRON PILLAR

The iron pillar at Mehrauli, Delhi, is a remarkable example of the skill of Indian crafts persons. It is made of iron, 7.2. m high, and weighs over 3 tonnes. It was made about 1500 years ago. We know the date because there is an inscription on the pillar mentioning a ruler named Chandra, who probably belonged to the Gupta dynasty. What is amazing is the fact that the pillar has not rusted in all these years.



BUILDINGS IN BRICK AND STONE

The skills of our crafts persons are also apparent in the buildings that have survived, such as stupas. The word stupa means a mound. While there are several kinds of stupas, round and tall, big and small, these have certain common features. Generally, there is a small box placed at the centre or heart of the stupa. This may contain bodily remains (such as teeth, bone or ashes) of the Buddha or his followers, or things they used, as well as precious stones, and coins.

This box, known as a relic casket, was covered with earth. Later, a layer of mud brick or baked brick was added on top. And then, the dome like structure was sometimes covered with carved stone slabs. Often, a path, known as the pradakshina patha, was laid around the stupa. This was surrounded with railings. Entrance to the path was through gateways. Devotees walked around the stupa, in a clock-wise direction, as a mark of devotion. Both railings and gateways were often decorated with sculpture. This was a place where a magnificent stupa once existed. Many of the stone carvings for decorating the stupa were made about 2000 years ago. Other buildings were hollowed out of rock to make artificial caves. Some of these were very elaborately decorated with sculptures and painted walls.



Some of the earliest Hindu temples were also built at this time. Deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Durga were worshipped in these shrines. The most important part of the temple was the room known as the garbhagriha, where the image of the chief deity was placed. It was here that priests performed religious rituals, and devotees offered worship to the deity.



Often, as at Bhitargaon, a tower, known as the shikhara, was built on top of the garbhagriha, to mark this out as a sacred place. Building shikharas required careful planning. Most temples also had a space known as the mandapa. It was a hall where people could assemble.

Some of the finest stone temples were built in these towns. Some of these are shown here.



HOW WERE STUPAS AND TEMPLES BUILT?

There were several stages in building a stupa or a temple. Usually, kings or queens decided to build these as it was an expensive affair. First, good quality stone had to be found, quarried, and transported to the place that was often carefully chosen for the new building. Here, these rough blocks of stone had to be shaped and carved into pillars, and panels for walls, floors and ceilings. And then these had to be placed in precisely the right position.

Kings and queens probably spent money from their treasury to pay the crafts persons who worked to build these splendid structures. Besides, when devotees came to visit the temple or the stupa, they often brought gifts, which were used to decorate the buildings. For example, an association of ivory workers paid for one of the beautiful gateways at Sanchi. Among the others who paid for decorations were merchants, farmers, garland makers, perfumers, smiths, and hundreds of men and women who are known only by their names which were inscribed on pillars, railings and walls. So when you get a chance to visit any of these buildings, remember how several hundreds of people probably worked to construct and decorate them.



PAINTING

This is a place where several caves were hollowed out of the hills over centuries. Most of these were monasteries for Buddhist monks, and some of them were decorated with paintings. Here are some examples.

As the caves are dark inside, most of these paintings were done in the light of torches. The colours, which are vivid even after 1500 years, were made of plants and minerals. The artists who created these splendid works of art remain unknown.



THE WORLD OF BOOKS

Some of the best-known epics were written during this period. Epics are grand, long compositions, about heroic men and women, and include stories about gods.

A famous Tamil epic, the Silappadikaram, was composed by a poet named Ilango, around 1800 years ago. It is the story of a merchant named Kovalan, who lived in Puhar and fell in love with a courtesan named Madhavi, neglecting his wife Kannagi. Later, he and Kannagi left Puhar and went to Madurai, where he was wrongly accused of theft by the court jeweller of the Pandya king. The king sentenced Kovalan to death. Kannagi, who still loved him, was full of grief and anger at this injustice, and destroyed the entire city of Madurai.

Another Tamil epic, the Manimekalai was composed by Sattanar around 1400 years ago. This describes the story of the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi. These beautiful compositions were lost to scholars for many centuries, till their manuscripts were rediscovered, about a hundred years ago.

RECORDING AND PRESERVING OLD STORIES

A number of Hindu religious stories that were in circulation earlier were written down around the same time. These include the Puranas. Purana literally mean old. The Puranas contain stories about gods and goddesses, such as Vishnu, Shiva, Durga or Parvati. They also contain details on how they were to be worshipped. Besides, there are accounts about the creation of the world, and about kings.

The Puranas were written in simple Sanskrit verse, and were meant to be heard by everybody, including women and shudras, who were not allowed to study the Vedas. They were probably recited in temples by priests, and people came to listen to them.

Two Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana had been popular for a very long time. Some of you may be familiar with these stories. The Mahabharata is about a war fought between the Kauravas and Pandavas, who were cousins.

This was a war to gain control of the throne of the Kurus, and their capital, Hastinapur. The story itself was an old one, but was written down in the form in which we know it today, about 1500 years ago. Both the Puranas and the Mahabharata are supposed to have been compiled by Vyasa.

The Ramayana is about Rama, the prince of Kosala, who was sent into exile. His wife Sita was abducted by the king of Lanka, named Ravana, and Rama had to fight a battle to get her back. He won and returned to Ayodhya, the capital of Kosala, after his victory. Like the Mahabharata, this was an old story that was now written down. Valmiki is recognised as the author of the Sanskrit Ramayana.

There are several versions (many of which are performed) of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, popular amongst people in different parts of the subcontinent. Find out about a version in your state.

STORIES TOLD BY ORDINARY PEOPLE

Ordinary people also told stories, composed poems and songs, sang, danced, and performed plays. Some of these are preserved in collections of stories such as the Jatakas and the Panchatantra, which were written down around this time. Stories from the Jatakas were often shown on the railings of stupas and in paintings in places such as Ajanta. Here is one such story.

WRITING BOOKS ON SCIENCE

This was also the time when Aryabhata, a mathematician and astronomer, wrote a book in Sanskrit known as the Aryabhatiyam. He stated that day and night were caused by the rotation of the earth on its axis, even though it seems as if the sun is rising and setting everyday. He developed a scientific explanation for eclipses as well. He also found a way of calculating the circumference of a circle, which is nearly as accurate as the formula we use today.