

Construction of Ancient 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**

• **Material Remains :**

Material remains recovered as a result of excavation and explorations are subjected to various kinds of examinations. Their dates are fixed according to radiocarbon dating. For example, excavated sites belonging to the Harappa 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. The dates of remains found in excavations are fixed by various methods. The most important of them is the Radiocarbon or Carbon 14 (C14) dating method. Carbon 14 is a radioactive carbon present in all living objects. It decays, like all radioactive substances, at a uniform rate when the object is dead. By measuring the loss of C14 content in an ancient object (wood or bone) its age can be determined.

• **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 Indo-Greeks 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).

Coins provide useful information regarding economic history as they were used as a medium of exchange. Some coins were issued by guilds or associations of the merchants and craftsmen with the permission of the rulers. This shows the influence of craft and commerce. Coins also portray kings and gods, and contain religious symbols, all to which throw light on the art and religion of the time.

• **Inscriptions**

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 Ashoka and inscriptions recording the land grants by Satavahanas, Kings of the Deccan.

• **Literacy Sources**

- **The literary source includes literature of Vedic, Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, and other literature along with other foreign accounts.**
- **The ancient Indian literature is mostly religious in nature.**

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.

- **Foreigner Accounts**

Indigenous literature can be supplemented by foreign accounts. To India came the Greek, Chinese and Roman visitors, either as travellers 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.
- Fa-Hein, a Buddhist traveller, left a vivid account of the age of the Guptas.
- 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.

Prehistoric Period

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
5. 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 palaeolithic 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-

- Palaeolithic 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

Palaeolithic Age (Old Stone Age)

The term ‘Palaeolithic’ is derived from the Greek word ‘palaeo’ which means old and ‘lithic’ meaning stone. Therefore, the term Palaeolithic age refers to the old stone age. The old stone age or palaeolithic 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.

The Old Stone Age or palaeolithic age in India is divided into three phases according to the nature of the stone tools used by the people and also according to the nature of the change of climate.

1. Lower Palaeolithic Age: up to 100,000 BC
2. Middle Palaeolithic Age: 100,000 BC – 40,000 BC
3. Upper Palaeolithic Age: 40,000 BC – 10,000 BC

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.