



Archaeological Sources

Archaeological evidence holds great significance in the study of ancient Indian history. It serves as a valuable resource, both independently and in conjunction with literary sources, particularly in periods where literary evidence is scarce or ambiguous. Archaeological sources encompass a wide range of artifacts such as inscriptions, coins, monuments, buildings, sculptures, paintings, and other remnants, providing valuable insights into the past.

■ Inscriptions

Inscriptions play a paramount role as archaeological sources for comprehending ancient India. These inscriptions, discovered on various mediums such as seals, stone pillars, stupas, rocks, copper plates, temple walls, statues, and bricks, hold immense significance. The reliability of their manuscript adds to their authenticity as valuable sources of investigation. Notably, the inscriptions of Ashoka, found predominantly on stone pillars and rocks throughout his vast empire, offer profound insights into his reign, the nature of

his rule, and the administrative structure. When combined with literary sources, these inscriptions contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the Mauryan period. Notable inscriptions bearing Ashoka's name, such as those found in Maski and Gurjara, shed light on this era.

Furthermore, the discovery of copper manuscript plates containing land grant and individual inscriptions engraved on temples and idols provides invaluable information about the social, political, and economic systems of ancient India. The Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela, the ruler of Kalinga, and the Junagarh inscription of Rudradaman are particularly noteworthy for revealing forgotten events in Indian history.

Similarly, the Prayag-prashasti of Samudragupta, the Mehrauli inscription of King Chandra, and the Madhuban and Banskhera inscriptions of Harshvardhan, as well as inscriptions from the Satavahanas, Cholas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, and other South Indian dynasties, offer crucial insights into political history, administration, social dynamics,

economics, education, and religion. The presence of dates in these inscriptions aids in establishing chronology, while the script itself helps determine timelines for undated inscriptions. Moreover, the corroboration of literary details by these inscriptions adds further credibility to historical accounts.

■ Coins

The study of ancient Indian coins holds significant interest as it provides multifaceted information. Coins serve as indicators of economic activities, with inscriptions on one side offering insights into trade. The presence of kings' names on coins aids in understanding the lineage of rulers, while images of deities depicted on coins reflect religious beliefs. Moreover, coin designs showcase remarkable achievements in metallurgy and artistry.

The circulation of Punch-Marked coins in ancient India commenced around the fifth century BC, primarily issued by trading corporations without the inclusion of kings' names. The Indo-Greek rulers were the first to inscribe the names of kings on coins, thereby enabling the study of political history. Numismatic evidence reveals that India was ruled by 30 Indo-Greek kings. During this period, deities such as Krishna and Balarama were depicted on the coins. Following the Mauryan era, various coin types were issued by the Shakas, Kushans, and Satavahanas. These coins featured images of both kings and deities, and the minting process incorporated a diverse range of metals and textures.

Gupta coins exemplify a higher level of artistic finesse. Unlike smaller denomination coins, larger value coins gained prominence during the Gupta period. The first Gupta ruler, Chandragupta I, issued gold coins following the Kushan model, which were further continued by his successors, Samudragupta and Chandragupta Vikramaditya. In fact, the majority of gold coins in ancient India were issued by Gupta rulers.

The Gupta period is attributed to Chandragupta Vikramaditya, who minted silver coins to commemorate his victory in Gujarat over the Saka ruler. Gupta ruler Skandagupta introduced coins in the Karshapana model, while copper coins are relatively less abundant from this period. The Gupta coins are remarkable for their artistic excellence, employing the finest minting techniques. These coins featured engravings of rulers and various deities, showcasing the same level of artistic prowess found in Gupta sculpture and painting. For instance, Chandragupta I's 'Emperor and Empress' category coins depicted Durga seated on a lion on their reverse side. Samudragupta issued a variety of coins, with notable types such as the Ashwamedh, Vyaghra (Tiger), and Veena-playing coins. Similarly, Chandragupta II's coins portrayed archers, and Kumaragupta I's coins featured the image of Lakshmi seated on a lotus, all exemplifying excellent artistry.

However, the abundance of these fine coins seems to have diminished after the Gupta period. Later periods witnessed a scarcity of coins, reduced metal purity, and a lack of diversity in engraved images. Scholars like R.S. Sharma believed that not only coins, but also coin molds were scarce. Some coins from the Pala and Gahadwal rulers have been discovered in later periods.

Scholars hold different views regarding the causes of this decline. R.S. Sharma links it to a decline in trade, while others reject this notion, suggesting that although coin circulation continued, alternative materials might have been used in coin production.

Practice Questions -How do you justify the view that the level of excellence of the Gupta numismatic art is not at all noticeable in later times?
[UPSC 2017 150 words]

■ Architecture, Sculpture and Paintings

Archaeological sources, encompassing monuments, buildings, temples, sculptures, and painting styles, provide abundant study material

of great significance. These diverse remains offer valuable knowledge about their creators, the purpose behind their construction, and the societal context in which they emerged. Temples and sculpture, too, contribute to our understanding of ancient India's cultural and religious practices.

The excavation of Harappa and Mohenjodaro has played a crucial role in reconstructing the Harappan civilization. The remains of these cities have revealed an economically stratified society, shedding light on its social structure. Likewise, excavations at various ports, such as Arikamedu, have yielded antiquities that illuminate India's trade connections with other nations.

Nalanda and Vikramshila, through their ruins, evoke the grandeur of these ancient centers of learning. Sculptures discovered in Takshashila and Mathura have provided insights into the distinct styles of Gandhara and Mathura. Stupas in Sanchi, Bharhut, Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta, and the caves in Bagh, along with South Indian temples, serve as invaluable windows into the development of ancient sculpture and painting traditions.

Beyond these, other archaeological artifacts like pottery, toys, and seals assume significance in the study of the Harappan period. Notably, the discovery of around 500 seals in Mohenjodaro and other Harappan sites has shed light on the religious beliefs, economic systems, and commercial activities of that time.

Literary Source

Literary evidence serves as a valuable source for studying various aspects of a specific period; however, it requires careful interpretation. When exploring the history of ancient India, it is beneficial to categorize literary sources into two distinct segments: native literature and foreign literature. Furthermore, indigenous literature can be further divided into two sections: religious literature and non-religious literature. It is important to approach these sources with

diligence and discernment in order to extract accurate information.

■ Religious Literature

Religious literature can be divided into **Brahmin literature, Buddhist literature, and Jain literature**. The Vedas, also known as Shruti or Samhita, hold a significant position in Brahmin literature. There are four of them: Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda. These texts provide insights into the expansion of the Aryans, their religious beliefs, culture, as well as their political, social, and economic development. The Upanishads, compositions from the later Vedic period, are associated with one or the other Vedas and offer a glimpse into the oldest philosophical knowledge of the Aryans.

Among other available literary sources, the **Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas** are important for study purposes. The final compilation of the Mahabharata is estimated to have taken place around 400 AD, with Maharishi Vyas credited for its creation. Initially, it consisted of 8,800 verses, but the number increased to 24,000 during the final compilation. The Mahabharata's origin lies in the story of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, which may date back to the later Vedic period. The composition of the Ramayana likely began in the fifth century BC and continued until the twelfth century AD. This text narrates the conquest of Lanka by Rama, the ruler of Ayodhya (Kosala). It beautifully depicts the social and political background, including the Aryan and Dravidian regions, portraying aspects such as patriarchal family structures, love among brothers, the status of women, and the connection between humans and nature.

The number of **Puranas** is generally stated as eighteen, among which the Matsya, Markandeya, Vishnu, Vayu, Brahmanda, and Garuda Puranas are prominent. The Matsya Purana is considered one of the oldest. Descriptions of dynasties can be found in the

Matsya, Vayu, and Vishnu Puranas. Although the details regarding the dynasties in these Puranas may differ, they remain the primary means of obtaining information about the dynasties that ruled from the post-Mahabharata war until the 6th century AD.

Buddhist literature plays a crucial role as a source for studying ancient Indian history. At its core is the Tripitaka, which consists of the Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka. The Sutta Pitaka contains the words and religious teachings of Lord Buddha, while the Vinaya Pitaka outlines the rules of the Buddhist Sangha. The Abhidhamma Pitaka delves into sophisticated Buddhist philosophy. Moreover, all three Pitakas shed light on the political and social conditions during the time of Buddha's passing and afterward.

In addition, the **Jataka stories** provide valuable insights into contemporary society by recounting the previous lives of the Buddha. The history of Sri Lanka is known through genealogical (Vansh) literature such as Deepavansh and Mahavansh. An important work beyond the Tripitaka literature is the **Milinda-Panho**, which presents a philosophical debate between Indo-Greek king Minander and the Buddhist monk Nagasena. This book vividly portrays the magnificence of the ancient city of Shakal (Sialkot) and its economic significance. Similarly, details about the sixteen Mahajanapadas can be found in the Anguttar Nikaya. Buddhist literature also furnishes valuable information regarding India's external relations with other countries.

The final compilation of **Jain texts** occurred in the 6th century AD. Many significant Jain texts provide information about the political, social, and economic situation during that time. For instance, the Bhagavati Sutra sheds light on the life of Lord Mahavira and mentions the sixteen Mahajanapadas. Bhadrabahu Charita provides insights into the events of Chandragupta Maurya's reign. Additionally, texts such as Hemachandra's Parishishta Parvan, Haribhadrasuri's Samaraditya

Katha, and Jensen's Adipurana serve as important sources for study.

■ Non-Religious Literature

Non-religious literary evidence holds significant importance as a source of study, offering glimpses into the political and social activities of its time. For instance, **Panini's Ashtadhyayi** provides insights into the pre-Mauryan period. **Visakhadatta's Mudrarakshasa** sheds light on the events during the Maurya period. The most valuable source for understanding the Maurya period is **Kautilya's Arthashastra**, which extensively discusses political ideals, economic measures, and the societal conditions of that era.

Moreover, the **Gargi Samhita** references the Yavana invasion of India, while **Patanjali's Mahabhashya** traces the history of the Shunga dynasty. **Kalidasa's Malavikagnimitram** offers glimpses into the political and social life of the Shunga period, revealing how Agnimitra thwarted the Yavana invasion from spreading to other parts of India. Biographies written by various scholars for their patrons also make a significant contribution to literary evidence. **Banabhatta's Harshacharita**, for example, provides complex details about the reign of Harshavardhana.

■ Foreign Literature

In addition to native literature, the accounts of foreign authors serve as a crucial source for understanding the history of ancient India. Even in ancient times, India maintained continuous contact with the outside world and was not isolated. Consequently, foreign travelers visited India and documented their experiences in travelogues, which have now become significant sources for studying ancient Indian history. To facilitate our understanding, we can categorize foreign accounts into several groups.

• Greco-Roman Writers

In order to understand the history of north-west India in the fourth century BC, we heavily

rely on the accounts of Alexander's fellow historians like Aristobulus, Onesicritus, and Nearchus. Their descriptions provide valuable insights into that era. Furthermore, a pivotal moment in unraveling the mysteries of India's history came when the British scholar William Jones identified Sandrocottus as Chandragupta Maurya based on Greek accounts. This identification helped bring clarity to India's historical narrative.

During the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, the book 'Indica' written by Megasthenes, the ambassador of Greek ruler Seleucus Nicator, offers a comprehensive understanding of Mauryan administration, the tax system, economic activities, society, and religious practices. Megasthenes' work sheds light on various aspects of Mauryan society and provides invaluable information about that period.

As we move forward in time, the accounts of Roman writers, including Pliny, Strabo, Diodorus, and Arian, provide us with additional insights into India during the early centuries of Christ. These writers offer valuable details about trade, maritime activities, ports, and more, contributing to our understanding of India's historical interactions with the world.

- **Chinese Writers**

Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsang were important Chinese scholars who visited India. Fa-Hien came to India during the time of Chandragupta Vikramaditya, a ruler of the Gupta Empire, in the late fourth century. He came with the purpose of studying Buddhist institutions and collecting important Buddhist texts. He traveled extensively in North India and the Central Provinces, which gave him insights into the religion, society, and government of that time. However, it's worth noting that his writings sometimes show a preference for religion, like mentioning that Indians didn't eat onion and garlic, and that the laws in India were not very strict.

Hiuen Tsang, another famous Chinese

traveler, also came to India in search of Buddhist texts. He explored different regions, from North India to South India, and wrote about his experiences in a book called "**Record of the West**" or "**Si-Yu-Ki**." Hiuen Tsang's writings are more detailed and impressive than Fa-Hien's. Besides his religious interests, Hiuen Tsang also paid attention to politics. He wrote about the reign of Harshvardhan, including political events, and provided information about the economy and society of that time. Hiuen Tsang studied at Nalanda University and in Kanchipuram in the south. He also mentioned the decline of certain cities, such as Pataliputra. However, it's important to remember that Hiuen Tsang's descriptions may sometimes be exaggerated due to his religious beliefs, like claiming that Harshvardhan banned animal killing in his empire and that Indians had a great respect for their parents.

- **Arabian Writer**

Arabic writers play a significant role in the series of foreign travelers who visited India. Following the Arab conquest of Sindh, India established regular connections with the Arab world.

One noteworthy Arab scholar who visited India in the 9th century was Sulaiman. During his travels, the Pala dynasty ruled over eastern India. Sulaiman held great admiration for the Rashtrakuta ruler Amoghavarsha. He noted that Amoghavarsha granted religious freedom to Muslims in his kingdom and allowed the construction of mosques. Sulaiman regarded Amoghavarsha as one of the four great rulers.

Another Arab traveler, Al-Masudi, explored India in the 10th century. He was not only a scholar but also a geographer and historian, often referred to as the 'Herodotus' of the Arab region. During his visit, Kannauj was under the rule of Pratihara king Mihirbhoj.

However, the most significant Arab traveler to India was **Abu Rehan Al Beruni**, who arrived in the early 11th century alongside Mahmud of

Ghazni. He compiled his observations in his renowned book '**Kitab-ul-Hind**,' written in Arabic. Al Beruni's account serves as a major source for understanding the social and cultural history of the first half of the 11th century. He displayed a profound interest in Indian culture, even learned Sanskrit to gain deeper insights. Along with discussing the caste system in India, Al Beruni also addressed social issues like Sati Pratha (the practice of widow burning) and polygamy.

Practice Question- Assess the importance of the accounts of the Chinese and Arab travellers in the reconstruction of the history of India. [UPSC-2018, 150 words]

Question- The spread of Indian culture was not limited to the Indian subcontinent, but it also spread outside the Indian subcontinent

OR

Question- The history of the art of East Asia and South Asia would be incomplete without the study of Indian art. Examine this statement.

Answer – The economic relations between ancient India and the outside world have been well-studied, but the exploration of cultural relations has been neglected. It is important to recognize that as India engaged in trade and interaction with other regions, its culture also spread. Traders, Brahmins, Buddhist monks, Jain saints, and independent entrepreneurs played an important role in disseminating Indian culture.

During the time of the Kushans, India had direct contact with the Silk Route, leading to the spread of Indian culture in Central Asia and East Asia. A Buddhist scholar named Kumarajiva visited the region in the 4th century, contributing to the spread of Buddhism to China, Japan, and Tibet. Along with religion, Indian Buddhist literature and art also gained popularity in these areas.

Indian culture also reached Southeast Asia,

influenced by both Buddhist and Brahmin traditions. A version of the epic Ramayana developed indigenously in Southeast Asia, inspired by the story from northern India. The influence of Indian culture can be seen in Thailand, where the ancient capital was named Ayutthiya, which resembles Ayodhya. The Pallava and Chola rulers played important roles in spreading Brahmin religion and culture. Impressive architectural structures like the Vishnu temple in Angkor Wat, Cambodia, and the Borobudur temple, Buddhist temple in Indonesia exemplify the spread of Indian cultural influence.

However, it is important to note two things when studying the spread of Indian culture beyond the Indian subcontinent. First, Indian culture did not remain static but evolved as it interacted with regional elements. Second, the spread of culture was not one-sided, as Indian culture also absorbed influences from other regions. For instance, the widespread use of betel and betel nut in India was adopted from Southeast Asia.

Today, this ancient connection between India and other regions remains significant. It has shaped India's relations with Southeast Asian countries and serves as a foundation for cultural diplomacy. A notable example of this shared cultural heritage is the Nalanda University Project.

Question- Explaining the nature of Indian culture in ancient times, to determine how it became an example of unity in diversity?

Answer-

Religion:

- Aryan and non-Aryan elements mixed in religion, and Aryan and non-Aryan deities integrated through Avatarism in the early centuries of Christ.
- **Regular religious exchange between north and south India** –Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism originated in the north and gradually made their way to the south,

marking a significant religious and cultural exchange. Following their spread, Bhakti, a devotional practice based on the Puranas, also journeyed from the north to the south. In the southern region, the influence of Bhakti took on a new form, evolving through the expressions found in Sangam literature. This exchange of ideas and beliefs had a profound and lasting impact on North India, even after a span of 600-700 years. As a result, Bhakti, temple worship, and idol worship emerged as defining characteristics of both North and South societies, representing the shared religious and cultural fabric of the region.

Linguistic Literature:

- The Aryan language originated in the north, while the Dravidian language developed in the south. However, Sanskrit, an important Aryan language, gained acceptance in the south as well. Notably, several important Sanskrit texts were composed in the southern region. For instance, Shankaracharya's commentary on Advaita philosophy and Ramanuja's work were written in the south. Furthermore, the literature written in the Dravidian languages was also influenced by the northern region, which had a significant impact on its development.

Art:

- **Architecture**-The influence of the Nagara style on the development of the Dravidian style is undeniable. Similarly, the Nagara style also incorporated certain elements of the Dravidian style, such as the construction of Mandapa(pavilions). Furthermore, the Vesara style emerged as a fusion of the Nagara and Dravida styles, showcasing the interplay between the two architectural styles.
- **Painting**- The Southern dynasties have made significant contributions to the development of Ajanta paintings. The impact of Ajanta paintings can be clearly seen in the Pallava

paintings at Ellora and Sittanavasal, as well as in the Chola paintings at Tanjore.

- **Sculpture**-The art of Sarnath had a profound influence on the sculpture of Ellora, as well as the sculpture of the Pallava and Chola dynasties. India, with its vast geographical expanse, has not only exhibited remarkable cultural diversity but has also embodied the essence of 'unity in diversity'.

Question- Describe any four cultural elements of diversity in India and rate their relative significance in building a national identity.

[UPSC- 2015, 150 words]

Explanation of the question :- The question at hand has a vast scope, encompassing multiple dimensions as it seeks to trace the thread of unity throughout India's history, from ancient times to the present day. Additionally, it references a unique form of Indian nationalism known as 'unity in diversity'.

Answer: Culture not only plays a significant role in nation-building, but also shapes the character of a nation. Therefore, India's rich multiculturalism has bestowed a distinct character to the Indian nation.

Four major elements that showcase diversity in India are **religion and philosophy, language, literature, and art**. Religious diversity has been a prominent aspect of Indian culture. Hinduism, for instance, emerged from a blend of Aryan and non-Aryan religious sects. Bhakti, Avatarism, and idol worship are all products of non-Aryan sects. An intriguing example of religious diversity is the worship of both Goddess Durga and Mahishasura in different parts of India. Kampan's Tamil Ramayana leans towards Ravana, further highlighting this diversity. The process of integration and harmony continued even during the medieval period, exemplified by the Bhakti and Sufi movements, which epitomize the syncretic culture of that time.

Similar diversity exists in the field of philosophy as well. Ancient India has a long tradition of free debates, as emphasized by

Amartya Sen in his book 'Argumentative Indian.' Various ancient thinkers held different beliefs, with some embracing the concept of the soul and others rejecting it. Similarly, views on karma and reincarnation also varied among thinkers.

Furthermore, India exhibits remarkable linguistic and literary diversity. Many languages have thrived in India, including Hindi, Bengali, Odia, Maithili, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, and more. The realm of art is no exception to diversity. Ancient India witnessed the development of two major architectural styles, Nagara and Dravida, which later merged into the Vesara style. The spirit of coordination continued during the medieval period, exemplified by the harmonious blend of arch and purlin styles under Muslim rule. Sculpture and painting also reflected a fusion of elite and popular artistic expressions.

What makes India's diversity even more intriguing is how, after independence, it was embraced as a strength rather than a weakness. Our constitution makers respected this diversity and included 14 languages in the eighth schedule of the constitution (currently 22 languages). Unlike Western nations that championed one language for one nation, India became a nation based on multiple national languages. This unique model of nationalism, known as 'unity in diversity,' has served as a paradigm for alternative nationalism in India.

Question- Mention the cultural contribution of Harshavardhana.

Answer—Harshavardhan ascended to the throne of Kannauj during a period of political disintegration in North India. Not only did he halt the process of disintegration, but he also became a patron of literature and art. Here are some key aspects of Harshavardhan's rule:

- 1. Policy of religious harmony:** Although Harshavardhan and his ancestors worshiped the Sun, he embraced Mahayana Buddhism and offered it protection.
- 2. Public welfare initiatives:** Harshavardhan undertook various public welfare projects, including the construction of roads, digging of wells, and planting of trees along the roadside for shade.
- 3. Support for education:** Harshavardhan granted 100 villages to support the operations of Nalanda University, demonstrating his commitment to preserving and promoting education.
- 4. Patronage of scholars:** Harshavardhan himself was a renowned scholar and composed notable works such as Nagananda, Priyadarshika, and Ratnavali. Additionally, he extended his patronage to other scholars, including Banabhatta and Mayur.
- 5. Architectural endeavors:** Harshavardhan contributed to the construction of numerous stupas and temples. Notable examples include the establishment of Buddhist monasteries in Kannauj and Nalanda, as well as the construction of the Lakshmana temple in Sirpur.

