
UNIT 1 GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS¹ AND SOURCES*

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to learn:

- why in the study of the history of a country an understanding of its physical features is necessary;
- how we look at physical features as students of history;
- what are the different types of sources for the reconstruction of ancient Indian history; and
- what are the problems associated with the use of literary sources.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

History without geography is largely incomplete and devoid of its vital substance. It loses focus in the absence of the concept of space. History derives its focus from the concept of space. That is why history is regarded both as the history of humankind and the history of environment. It is difficult to separate the two. The history of humans and the history of environment mutually influence each other.

Reciprocal exchange between humans and nature began early, where each influenced the other. In the Indian subcontinent there are a diversity of situations, from deserts to regions of high rainfall and from vast alluvial plains to high mountains and rocky table-lands. Environment means the “physical surroundings and conditions, especially as affecting people’s lives” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 8th edition, 1990). Soil, rainfall, vegetation, climate

¹This Part of the Unit has been adopted from EHI-02, Block-1.

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and environment exercise considerable influence on the evolution of human societies.

The later part of the Unit introduces the different types of sources that historians use for the reconstruction of the past. There are three main types of sources: Literary; Archaeological; and Foreign Accounts.

1.2 GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS

The main purpose behind describing the physical features is to acquaint you with the visible differences in the topography of the different parts of India. There is a deep relationship between the physical geography of any region and its settlement patterns.

The basic physiographic divisions are three:

- 1) Himalayan Uplands,
- 2) Indo-Gangetic plains,
- 3) Peninsular India.

Himalayas are the youngest fold mountains on the Earth. Large quantities of alluvium are continuously carried down into the plains from these mountains owing to weathering and erosion. The Himalayan snow feeds the three great river systems — Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra — which tend to flow perennially.

The Indus plains saw the evolution of the first civilization while the Ganga plains have sustained and nurtured urban life, state and society and imperial fabrics from the first millennium BCE.

The northern plains and Peninsular India are separated by a large intermediate zone, which may be called Central India, extending from Gujarat to western Odisha over a stretch of 1600 kms; the Aravalli hills in Rajasthan separate the Indus plains from the Peninsula. The intermediate zone is characterized by the presence of the Vindhyan and Satpura ranges and the Chotanagpur plateau covering portions of Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar and Chhattisgarh.

On the southern edge of the intermediate zone or Central India begins the formation called Peninsular India. It is defined by the flow of four major rivers which flow into the Bay of Bengal. Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri have produced vast alluvial plains and helped the creation of nuclear areas in the plains and deltas enabling the sustenance of cultural growth through the ancient, medieval and modern periods.

The Narmada and Tapti have a westward flow and run into the Arabian Sea after traversing a long distance in hilly Central India. The well-known feature of the region is the Deccan Plateau. It extends from the Vindhyas in the north to the southern limits of Karnataka. The black soil in Maharashtra and in the adjoining part of the Central India is especially rich, for it retains moisture and is considered to be 'self-ploughing'. The soil yields good crops of cotton, millets, peanuts and oil seeds. The early farming cultures (Chacolithic) in western and Central India emerged in this region.

1.2.1 Specific Major Geographical Units

So far, we have considered features of the broad geographic divisions at a general plane. Let us now take up the specific major geographical units, which at instances conform to linguistic divisions, and look into their traits from a historical perspective.

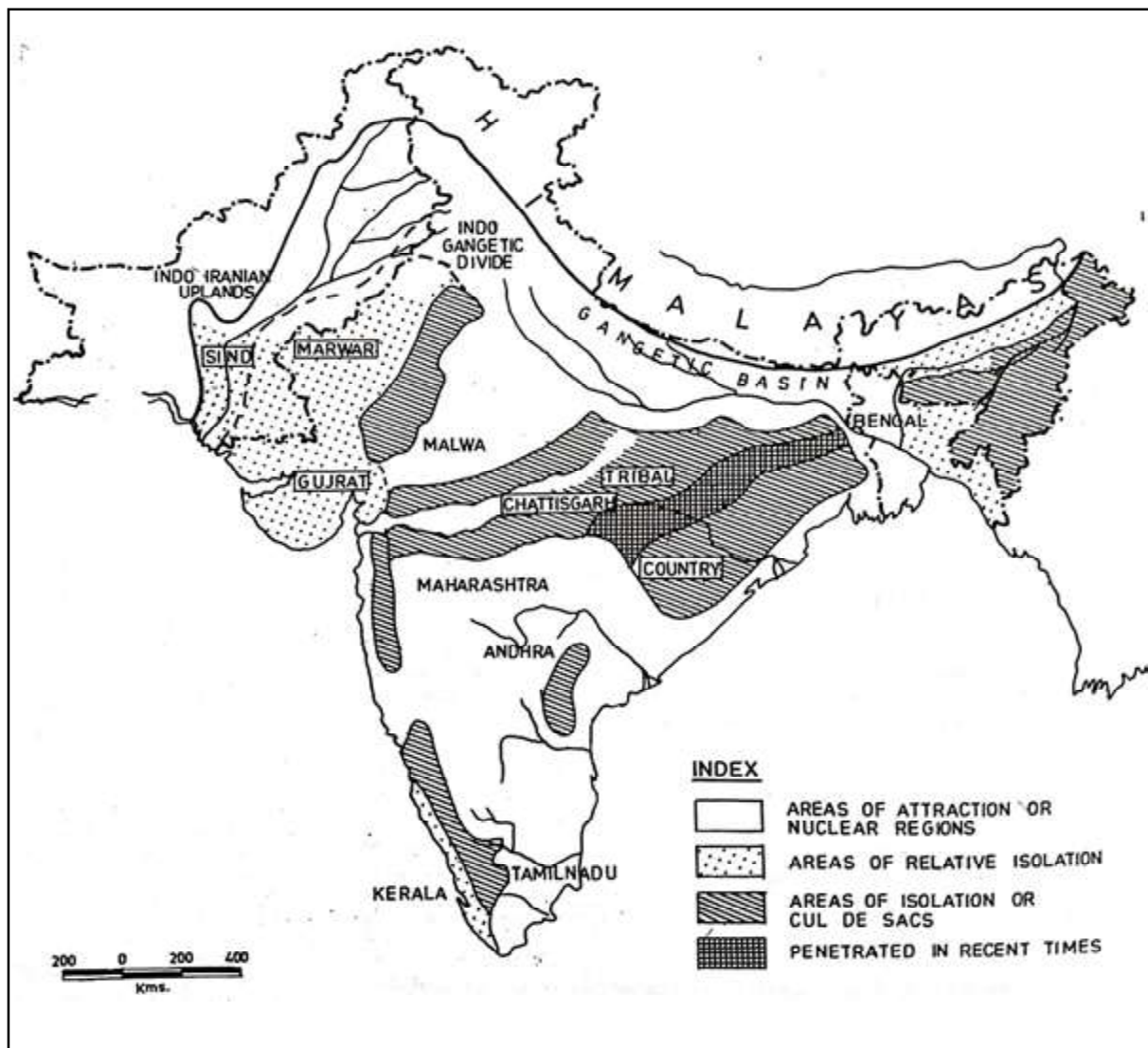
The Himalayas and the Western Frontier

The Himalayas can be divided into three broad units:

- Eastern,
- Western,
- Central.

The eastern mountains run to the east of the Brahmaputra in the north-south extending from Assam to south China. Although, the routes through the eastern mountains are difficult, that has not prevented the flow of cultural influences from Southeast Asia and South China in the prehistoric and historical times.

The central Himalayan region, extending from Bhutan to Chitral, lies at the fringe of the great table-land of Tibet. There have been trade and other contacts between India and Tibet across the frontier.

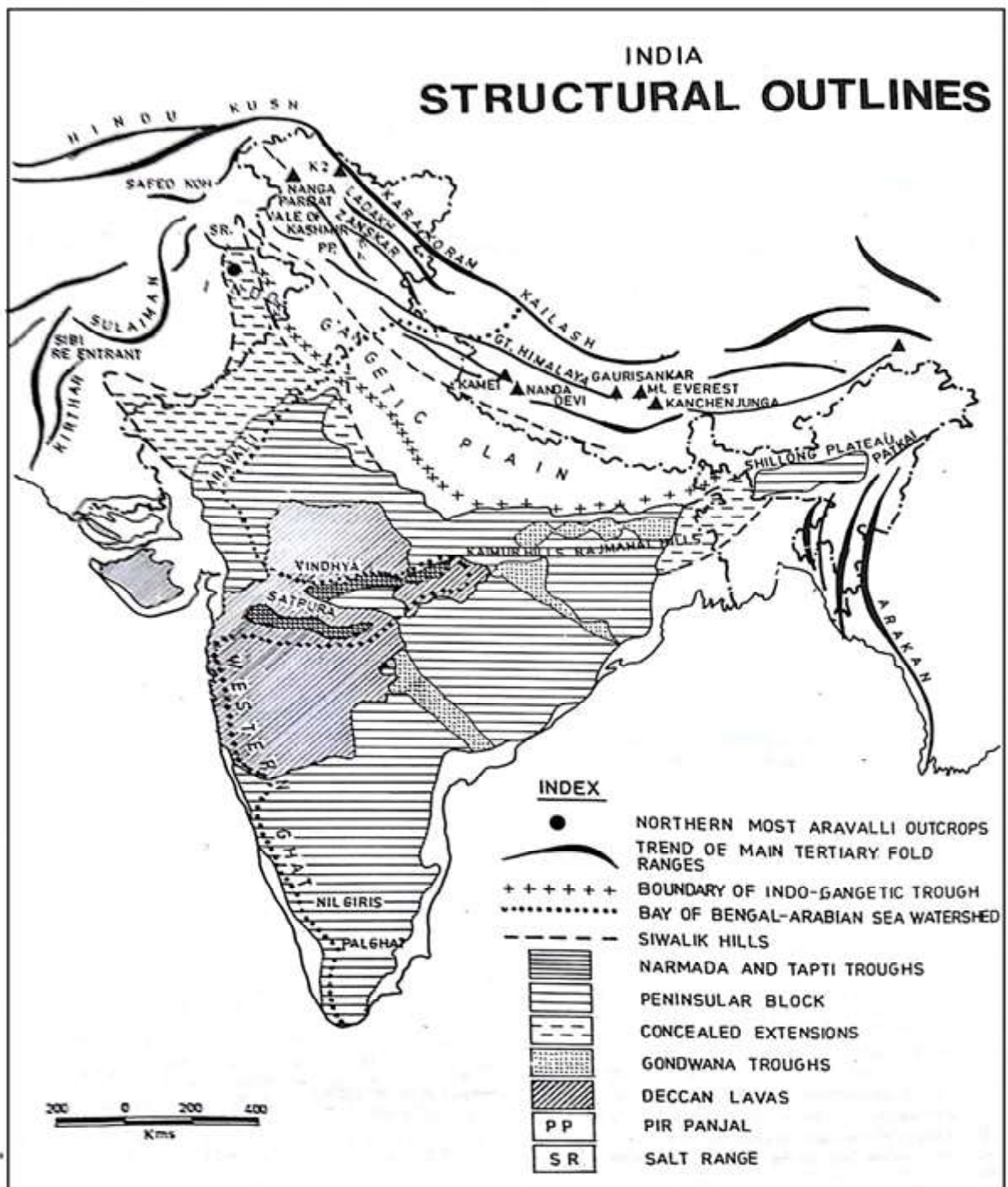


Map: Physical Regions of India

The narrow Hindu Kush range extends south-westward from the Himalayas deep into Afghanistan, covering ancient Gandhara. Geographically and culturally, western Afghanistan has affinities with eastern Iran but south-east Afghanistan has been culturally close with the Indian sub-continent right since the Neolithic age. The Khyber pass and other passes and the Kabul river link it with the Indus plains. It is no surprise that the site of Shortugai in this part of Afghanistan was a trading out-post of the Harappan civilization.

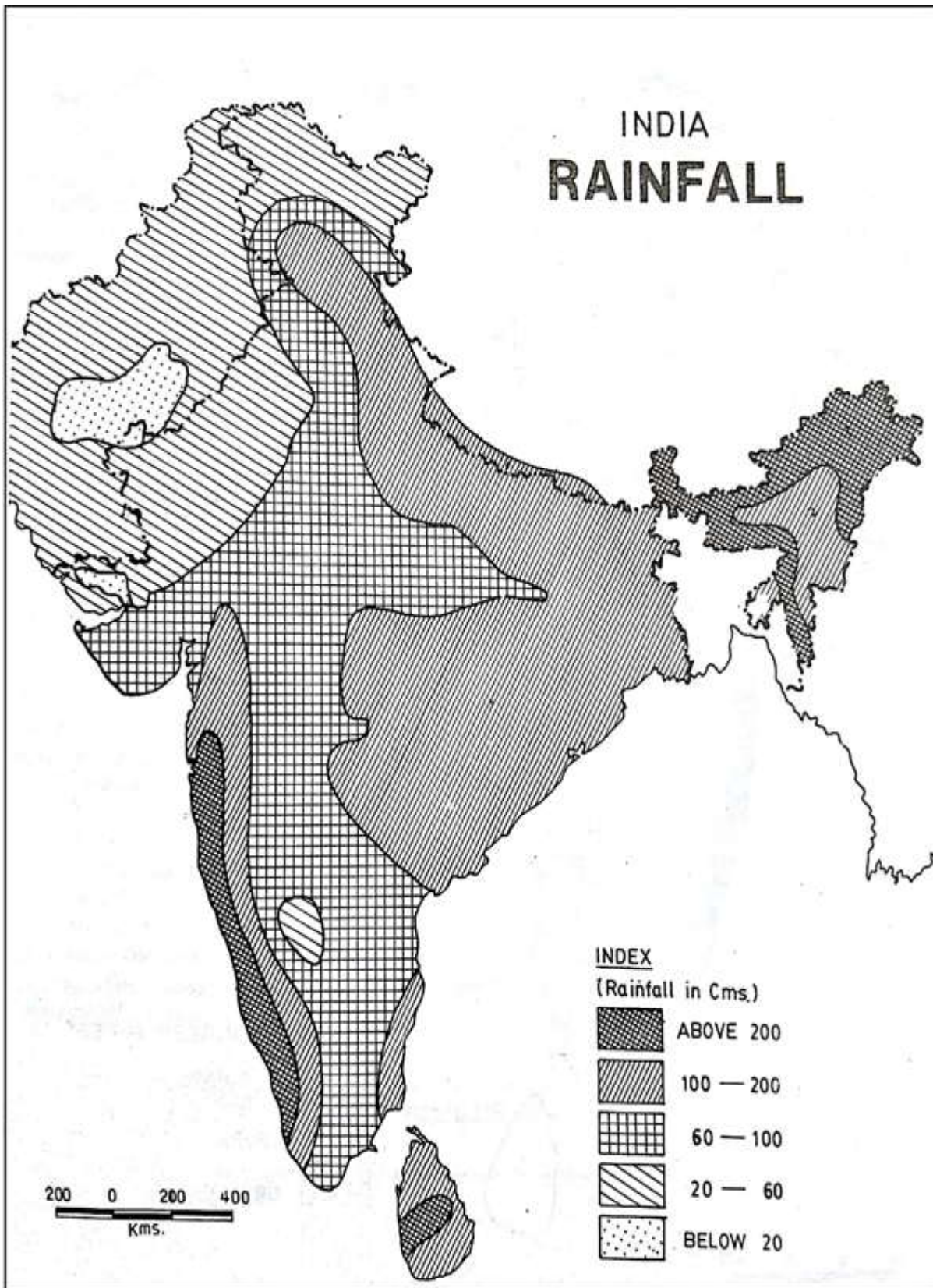
Ancient towns like Kabul and Kandahar are situated on trade routes between Iran and India.

The great routes connecting the Indian plains with Iran and Central Asia through Afghanistan run through the Gomal, Bolan and Khyber passes. These routes have brought in traders, invaders and varied cultural influences all through the

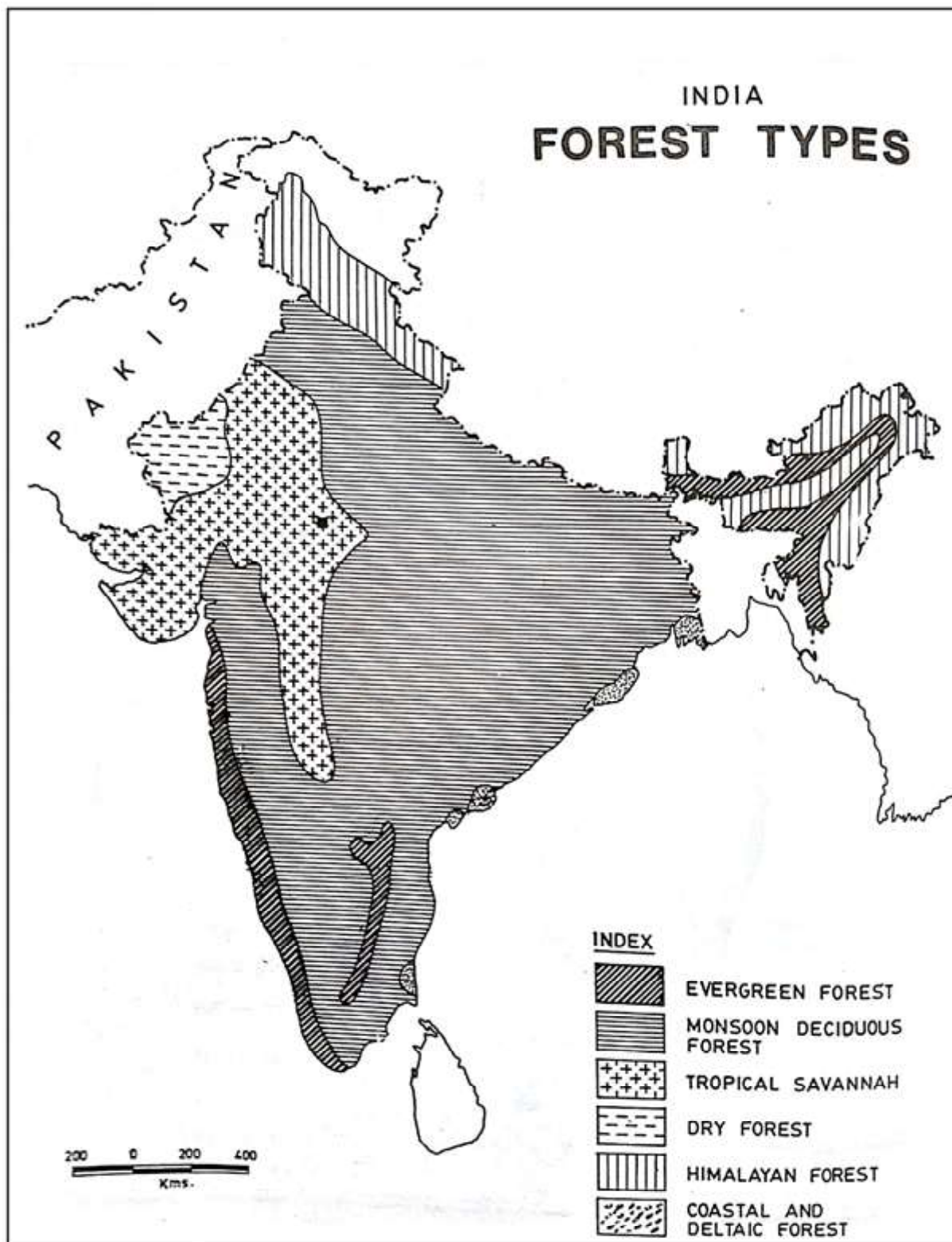


Map: Structural Outlines of India

historic times and even before. The Greeks, Shakas, Kushanas and Hunas and others made their entry into India through these routes. Buddhism and other aspects of Indian civilization entered Afghanistan and Central Asia through these passes. Historically, thus, the Afghan and Baluchistan hills have been an important frontier zone.



Map: Rainfall Zones of India



Map: Types of Forests in India

The Indus Plains

The passes lead to the rich plains of the Indus, which can be divided into two regions:

- Punjab, and
- Sindh.

Punjab (today divided between India and Pakistan) literally means the land of five rivers. These are Ravi, Beas, Chenab, Zhelum, and the Sutlej. These five tributaries of the Indus flowing across a vast alluvial plain have made the region the bread-basket of the subcontinent. Punjab has been the meeting place and the melting pot of cultures.

The lower Indus valley and the delta constitute Sindh. Sindh is situated by the Indus and produces large quantities of rice and wheat. As mentioned earlier, the Indus plain has nurtured the sub-continent's first urban culture during the later 3rd and early 2nd millennium BCE. Two of its major cities Harappa and Mohenjodaro are located in the Punjab and Sindh respectively.

Gangetic Northern India

The Ganga plains can be divided into three sub-regions:

- Upper,
- Middle, and
- Lower.

The Upper plains in western and central Uttar Pradesh largely include the *Doab*. This has been an area of conflict and cultural synthesis. There is increasing evidence of the extension of the Harappan culture into this zone. This was also the centre of the Painted Grey Ware culture and the scene of pulsating activity in the Later Vedic period.

At the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna at the terminal point of the *Doab* is Prayagaraj (ancient Prayaga). The Middle Ganga plains correspond to eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This is where ancient Kosala, Kashi and Magadha were situated. It was the centre of city life and money economy and trade since the 6th century BCE. This region provided the basis for Mauryan imperial expansion and it continued to be politically important till the Gupta period (5th century CE).

The Upper and Middle Ganga plains are geographically defined by the Himalayas on the north and the Central Indian hills on the south. The Lower plains are co-terminus with the province of Bengal. The wide plains of Bengal are formed by the alluvium brought by the Ganga and the Brahmaputra.

The Ganga plains have nurtured greater number of settlements and have sustained a higher population density than other similar regions. It has been the heartland of Indian civilization from the first millennium BCE, through the Classical phase, up to the present. Adjoining the Bengal plains is the long Assam valley produced by the Brahmaputra. It spreads over more than 600 kms. Culturally, Assam is close to Bengal but in terms of historical development it emerges as a late starter like Odisha.

Eastern, Western and Central India

Central India is an entirely different region and does not have a central focal point. The south-eastern part of the state to the east of the Aravallis is part of a sub-region called Malwa. Because of the fertility of the soil the region yields good crops. Chalcolithic settlements are distributed in good numbers in the region. Given its geographical location, it must have acted as a bridge between the Harappans and the other Chalcolithic communities in Central India and the northern Deccan.

Central India constitutes the present-day states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The Central Indian belt, especially southern Bihar, western Odisha and eastern Madhya Pradesh, has been an area of tribal concentration. Cultural influences from adjoining regions have influenced and integrated the tribals into the dominant caste-peasant base of Indian society from early historic times and more so from the Gupta period.

Gujarat is situated on the western fringe of the Central Indian Belt. It consists of three natural divisions: Saurashtra, Anarta (N. Gujarat) and Lata (S. Gujarat). The central peninsula of Gujarat is called Kathiawar. The low-lying Rann of Kutch is another feature which during the monsoon turns into a swamp. Although Gujarat appears to have been a zone of isolation, actually, it is a region of continuous ancient settlements dating back from the Harappan period. Because of its protected position and the lengthy coastline Gujarat has been the focus of coastal and external trade for more than four thousand years.

To the south-west of the delta of the Ganga at the eastern end of the hills of Central India are the coastal plains of Odisha. Not only has it been an agrarian base but also a centre of socio-cultural development. Odisha began to develop her linguistic and cultural identity late in the first millennium CE.

Peninsular India

The Deccan Plateau and the surrounding coastal plains define the contours of Peninsular India. The plateau is divided into four major regions which largely correspond to the states of Maharashtra, Andhra, Telangana and Karnataka. Neolithic settlers in south-western Andhra based themselves on pastoralism as an adaptational strategy; the Chalcolithic communities of the northern Deccan increasingly relied on agriculture.

The Extreme South

The wide eastern coastal plain in the south and its adjoining hinterland constitute Tamil Nadu. The Kaveri plain and its delta constitute its epicentre. The rivers in the region being seasonal, the peasants of the region relied on tank irrigation since the Pallava-Chola times. The ecological variations, which supported alternative, at times, interrelated ways of life, are attested to in the *Sangam* literature.

The western coastal plain, too, broadens in the extreme south and corresponds to the region known as Malabar or the present state of Kerala. In addition to rice and other crops, Kerala produces pepper and spices which have been traded with the West since the post-Mauryan times. Relatively isolated by land, Kerala has been open to the sea and interestingly first the Christian and then the Muslim influence here came by sea.

1.3 UNEVEN PATTERNS OF THE EMERGENCE OF HISTORICAL REGIONS

It should be remembered that in history the processes of the emergence of regions have been uneven. The uneven pattern of cultural growth and the differential configuration of historical forces in the numerous regions were greatly influenced by geography.

The uneven development of regions can be demonstrated through interesting historical situations. For example, in the second half of the third millennium BCE one encounters Mesolithic cultures in Gujarat and at the same time Neolithic cattle-keepers were traversing the landscape of the Deccan. What is striking is that the mature, advanced Harappan civilization co-existed with these cultures and regions at different levels of growth. Such tendencies have persisted all through Indian history. To put it differently, while the Indus and Saraswati basins were colonized in the third millennium BCE, the first large scale agricultural communities of the Deccan, Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Gujarat belong essentially to the Iron Age, and can be placed in the second half of the first millennium BCE. Though the Gangetic north attracted settlements early on, the vast areas of intermediate zones or forested hills of Central India were never thoroughly colonized and, therefore, they continued to provide shelter and isolation to tribes at different stages of primitive economy. In the subcontinent, civilization and a more complex culture with hierarchical social organization reached different areas in different periods and the regional spread of a more advanced material culture was unevenly balanced.

1.4 THE NATURE OF REGIONS

A yet another way to classify regions is to understand them in terms of Areas of Perennial Nuclear Regions, Areas of Relative Isolation and Areas of Isolation. Let us see the merit of such a classification.

In Indian history we see the early emergence of some regions as perennial bases of power. In such regions we observe an uninterrupted succession of powerful kingdoms. In contrast, there were other less favoured regions too.

The perennial nuclear regions correspond to the major river valleys, such as the Ganga, Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri, and they have been areas of attraction for human settlements. The availability of resources and the convergence of trade and communication routes have added to their importance. Logically, they have emerged as important centres of power.

However, it should be remembered that nuclearity or otherwise of a region is linked with how historical factors converge on it. Areas of relative isolation in Central India such as the country of Bhils, Bastar and the Rajmahal hills, in terms of structure of settlements, agrarian history, social organization and state systems, differed from the nuclear regions. Because regions developed historically, the distinction between the three types of regions is not unalterably fixed once for all. Transformation from one category to the other is possible at a certain point.

Can geography and environment be taken as some kind of prime movers? All natural regions are only areas of possibilities and these possibilities are actualized

through human intervention at the stage of their technological attainments. Thus, history cannot be perceived in terms of geographical determinism.

If we look at the Harappan civilization, we find that it was the active interaction between the environment and social set up that led to the ecological fallout. The first urban civilization, Harappan civilization, of the Indian subcontinent evolved in a very wide region of the north-west. Archaeological evidence indicates extensive use of the plough during this time. They had also begun to add indigenous rainy season crops like rice and pulses to the winter crops of wheat, barley, lentils of West Asian origin. The agricultural surplus thus produced permitted the establishment of many towns, where the surplus served to promote further processing and exchange of materials, as well as trade and artisanal activities. Exchange over long distances, as opposed to barter on a small scale, called for maintenance of records, and the Indus Valley civilization offers the first evidence of literacy in Indian history. The gradual weakening and disappearance of the urban centres of this civilization has been attributed to a variety of possible causes. The drying up of the Saraswati river, flooding of the Indus, climatic change as evident from palaeobotany, salination of the agricultural soil due to irrigation and over-utilization of the natural resources leading to depletion of the natural vegetation cover: all or some of these led to the collapse of the Indus civilization.

Scholars are giving importance to ecological imbalances as one of the main reasons for the decline of this civilization. This was caused by wearing out of the landscape by continuous human and animal use over a long period of time. The depletion of the subsistence base caused strain on the entire economy of the civilization. This is reflected in gradual deterioration in town planning and living standards of the people. Gradually, the Harappans moved out of the core regions to areas offering better subsistence possibilities.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Discuss the three main physiographic divisions of India in five lines each.

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- 2) Write a note on the nature of regions.

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1.5 SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

Sources are important for the reconstruction of the past. Any remnant of the past can serve the purpose of a source.

We have a variety of sources for reconstructing the history of ancient India. Broadly, they can be classified under the following main categories:

- i) Literary,
- ii) Archaeological,
- iii) Foreign Accounts.

Under the literary sources can be included the Vedic, Buddhist and Jain literature, the Epics, *Puranas*, *Sangam* literature, ancient biographies, poetry and drama. Under the broad head of Archaeology, we may consider epigraphic, numismatic and architectural/archaeological remains that are recovered as the result of archaeological explorations and excavations.

In Indian history there is a primacy accorded to the written records. However, archaeological artifacts in the form of temple remains, coins, house remains, post-holes, pottery, silos etc. also constitute an important category of evidence. For all the three periods of Indian history – ancient, medieval and modern – the archaeological evidence has acquired a lot of significance. It is indispensable for those periods which did not have any writing; for example, the prehistoric and proto-historic period of Indian history.

The sources can also be divided into primary and secondary. All archaeological artifacts recovered from the earth or written documents in the form of temple records; *talapatra* (palm-leaf manuscripts); inscriptions on palm leaves, pillars, rocks, copper plates, pot sherds etc. together constitute what are called the **primary** sources. These are used by the historians to write articles, books or any form of written history which are used by the subsequent researchers and are, hence, called the **secondary** sources.

The written primary sources are of two kinds:

- i) Manuscript sources/ Inscriptions
- ii) Published material.

One needs to be careful with all such records as one should find out the purpose behind them, what audience they were intended for, and, thus, accordingly proceed with caution.

There are some crucial aspects which need to be taken care of when one is studying texts for historical information. Upinder Singh has pointed out that if the text was composed at a specific period than its use as a historical source is unproblematic. However, the exercise becomes much more complex if the composition extends over a long period of time. For example, in the case of the Indian Epic *Mahabharata*, it is difficult to bracket it as a text composed at a specific point of time. In such cases the historian has to sift through various chronological layers and look critically into various additions and interpolations. Language, style and content of a text have to be analyzed. In the case of both-

Mahabharata and *Ramayana*, critical editions have been made where different manuscripts of these texts have been analyzed and an attempt has been made to identify their original core.

Certain questions have to be kept in mind while studying texts, for example, why were they composed? For whom? What was their social and cultural context? A text may represent an ideal and must not be taken as a description of what was actually happening at that time. A text, like so many of Indian religious texts, may contain myths which may have pointers to historical information, but should be studied with caution.

1.5.1 Literary Sources

Most of the early Indian literature contains much that deals with religion, theology, cosmology, cosmogony, magic, ritual, prayers and mythology. There are problems associated with dating these texts since their period of composition and compilation differ by a wide margin. As their subject matter is theology or religion, it is difficult to understand them historically. The *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Brahmanas*, *Shashtra* literature, Epics and *Puranas* etc. deal broadly with non-secular themes. We will be studying these different categories of early Indian literature as sources of Indian history.

Vedas

The earliest known literature from the Indian subcontinent is in Sanskrit. The word *veda* is derived from the Sanskrit root 'vid' which means 'to know'. *Veda* means knowledge. They are oral literature par excellence. They are traditionally regarded as 'heard' or revealed texts. The Vedic literature consists of three different classes of literary works which are:

- a) *Samhitas* or collections, namely collections of hymns, prayers, incantations, benedictions, sacrificial formulas and litanies. Four *Samhitas* are in existence which differ from each other:
 - 1) *Rigveda Samhita*: The collection of the *Rigveda*. It is the *veda* or the knowledge of the songs of praise (*ric*).
 - 2) *Atharvaveda Samhita*: The collection of the *Atharvaveda* or the knowledge of magical formulae (*atharvan*).
 - 3) *Samveda Samhita*: The collection of the *Samveda* i.e. the knowledge of melodies (*saman*).
 - 4) *Yajurveda Samhita*: The collection of the *Yajurveda* i.e. the knowledge of the sacrificial formulas (*yajus*).
- b) *Brahmanas*: These are voluminous prose texts which contain theological matter, especially observations on sacrifice and the practical or mystical significance of the separate sacrificial rites and ceremonies.
- c) *Aranyakas* (forest texts) and *Upanishads* (secret doctrines): They contain the incantations of the forest hermits and ascetics on God, the world, mankind and contains a good deal of oldest Indian philosophy.

The whole Vedic literature is considered to have been revealed by God and therefore considered sacred. Chronologically, it spans a thousand years with some belonging to an earlier period and some portions to a later period. The *Rigveda* is the oldest and consists of ten books or *mandalas*. Books II-VII are the earliest.

These are also called Family Books because each is ascribed by tradition to a particular family of *rishis*. When we refer to Early Vedic literature, we essentially refer to Books II -VII of the *Rigveda*, believed to have been composed between c. 1500-1000 BCE. The Later Vedic Literature includes Books I, VIII, IX and X of the *Rigveda*, *Samveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*. These were composed between c. 1000 BCE to 500 BCE.

Though most of the Vedic literature contains songs, prayers, theological and theosophical matter, these have been used by the historians to cull out political, religious and social data of much historical value. Information about processes like the transition from a pastoral, pre-class/caste society in the *Rigveda* to agrarian, class, caste society and the formations of political territories in the Later Vedic period has been obtained from these texts.

Then, there is a category of texts — the *Sutras* — which form part of the post-Vedic literature. These have been classified as ‘*smriti*’ or ‘memorized rather than heard’ (*shruti*) texts. The suggested meaning is that these were composed by humans — great sages — and as such, do not enjoy the sanctity of the *Vedas* though they are considered authoritative in their own right. The *Sutra* texts are manuals on ritual (c. 600-300 BCE). These include:

- a) *Shrautasutra*: contains rules for the performance of the great sacrifices.
- b) *Grihyasutra*: contains directions for the simple ceremonies and sacrificial acts of daily life.
- c) *Dharmasutra*: These are books of instructions on spiritual and secular law. They are the oldest law books.

Post-*Sutra* texts are the *Smriti* texts which are *Manu Smriti*, *Narada Smriti* and *Yajnavalkya Smriti*. These were composed between c. 200 BCE and 900 CE. They prescribe duties for different *varnas* as well as for kings and their officials. They set out rules for marriage and property. They also prescribe punishments for persons guilty of theft, assault, murder, adultery etc.

Oral and Written Tradition in Early India

A large portion of early Indian literature belongs to the oral tradition. The *Vedas* are traditionally regarded as *Shruti* i.e. ‘heard’ or revealed texts, words said to have been uttered by God Brahma in the ears of the first Man. They were handed down from one generation to the next with emphasis on memorization. Lotika Varadarajan feels that the process of memorization of the sacred texts obfuscated the vulgarization and corruption of the ritual utterances. This would have not been possible if these were transmitted through the written word. Knowledge was sacred and closed and only to be transmitted to a worthy student.

The advent of literacy is associated with urbanization in India. The increase in trade and commerce coincided with the use of script and references abound about promissory notes, letters of credit, records of items produced and exchanged and even usury. The inscriptions were the greatest expressions of literacy. The Ashokan inscriptions dating to the third century BCE used the Brahmi script, the earliest evidence of the use of Brahmi. Romila Thapar remarks that what is true about Indian culture was that the oral and the written were closely integrated in cultural expression and written was not imposed on the oral tradition thus preventing it from becoming an alien feature.

Kautilya's *Arthashastra*

It is an important law book. The text is divided into fifteen books of which Book II and III may be regarded as being of an earlier date and seem to have been the work of different hands. It was put into final form in the beginning of the Common Era. However, the earliest portions reflect the state and society of the Mauryan period. It provides rich material for the study of early Indian polity and economy.

Ramayana and Mahabharata

The two famous Epics — *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* — are known as *Itihasa* ('thus it was') or narratives. Both took many centuries to come into shape and the period roughly assigned to them is c. 500 BCE-500 CE. Vyasa's *Mahabharata* is older and possibly reflects the state of affairs from the tenth century BCE-fourth century CE. The main narrative which relates to the Kaurava-Pandava conflict may relate to the Later Vedic period; the descriptive portion might be post-Vedic and the didactic portions generally relate to post-Maurya and Gupta periods (Sharma, 2005). Since both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* contain interpolations and portions added at various points of time, historians have to be careful in sifting material. They also have to take into account different chronological layers. The *Ramayana* of Valmiki appears to be more unified than the *Mahabharata*. Some of the sites mentioned in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been excavated. Ayodhya excavations have revealed settlement going back to the Northern Black Polished Ware period. Hastinapura, Kurukshetra, Panipat, Baghpat, Mathura, Tilpat and Bairat have been excavated and these date back to the Painted Grey Ware period. Both Epics are a mine of information on religious sects, how they were integrated into mainstream Hinduism, social practices and norms current at the time, and philosophy.

Puranas

These are a category of texts attributed to Vyasa. There are eighteen *Mahapuranas* and numerous *Upapuranas* (secondary *Puranas*). The major *Puranas* were compiled by c. 400 CE. Their content indicates that these were the works of various hands. The *Puranas* has five sections- *sarga* (the creation of the world), *pratisarga* (re-creation), *manvantaras* (periods of the various Manus), *vamsha* (the genealogy of gods and *rishis*), and *Vamshanucharita* (an account of royal dynasties). Many *Puranas* like Vayu, Brahmanda, Brahma, Harivamsha, Matsya, Vishnu contain useful information for reconstructing the history of ancient India. As mentioned before, the *Puranas* contain considerable genealogical information. However, it is the later genealogies of the *Kali* Age that are historically important. There is much on ancient dynasties such as Haryankas, Shaishunagas, Nandas, Mauryas, Sungas, Kanvas and Andhras. Certain kings with their names ending in the suffix '*naga*' are also mentioned who supposedly ruled in northern and Central India. Interestingly, we do not know about these kings from any other source. The dynastic lists end with the Guptas indicating that the *Puranas* may have been compiled by fourth-sixth centuries CE. However, there are a few which are later such as *Bhagvata Purana* (tenth century) and *Skanda Purana* (fourteenth century).

Puranas are also important for providing geographical information on rivers, lakes, mountains and other places. Hence, they are crucial for reconstructing the historical geography of ancient India. Besides, they are a good source of information on the three major cults of Hinduism — Vishnu, Siva and Shakti.

Various processes like how different cults became integrated within the major religious traditions, and how minor cults like Ganpatya, Krishna, Brahma, Karttikeya emerged, can also be gleaned from them. *Puranas* have been understood as a vehicle through which the brahmanas spread their social and religious values.

Sangam Literature

The earliest Tamil texts are found in the corpus of *Sangam* literature. This is the work of poets who composed them over a period of three to four centuries. They assembled in colleges which were called *Sangams* and the literature produced in these colleges was called *Sangam* literature. There were three *Sangams* or literary gatherings — the first and last at Madurai and the second at Kapatapuram. This entire body of literature is dated to first four centuries of the Common Era, though they may have been completed by the sixth century. There is, however, some doubts about the historicity of these gatherings. Scholars, therefore, like to use the term “early classical Tamil literature” rather than *Sangam* literature (Singh, 2008).

The poems, some 30000 lines of poetry, are on the theme of love and war. They were modelled on the bardic songs of ancient times and transmitted orally for a long time before they were compiled. They do not constitute as religious literature. The poets came from all walks of life and included teachers, merchants, carpenters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, soldiers, ministers and kings. Due to their varied themes and authorship they are a mine of information on everyday life of the people of their times (Singh, 2008). They constitute literature of the highest quality.

Many poems mention a king or a hero by name and describe in detail his military exploits. The gifts made by him to bards and warriors are celebrated. May be, these poems were recited in the court. It is a possibility that the names of the kings refer to historical figures. Chola kings are mentioned as donors.

The *Sangam* literature mentions many flourishing towns such as Kaveripattinam. They also speak of *Yavanas* coming in their own vessels and purchasing pepper for gold and supplying wine and women slaves to the natives (Sharma, 2005). Their information on trade is corroborated by archaeology and foreign accounts.

Biographies, Poetry and Drama

Early India is a repository of masterpieces of drama and poetry. Historians have used them to cull out information on the times in which they were composed. The earliest Sanskrit poets and playwrights include Ashvagosha and Bhasa. Ashvagosha authored *Buddhacharita*, *Sariputraprakarna* and *Saundarananda*. Bhasa was a dramatist and wrote *Pancharatra*, *Dutavakya*, *Balacarita* and *Svapna-Vasavadatta*. The great Sanskrit writer Kalidasa (fourth-fifth centuries) authored dramas like *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvashiyam* and poetic works such as *Raghuvamsha*, *Kumarasambhavam* and *Meghadutam*. They provide important insights into the social and cultural life of the Guptas. Then, there are ancient dramas on historical themes. Mention may be made of Vishakadatta’s *Mudrarakshasa* (seventh-eighth centuries). This drama is based on how Chanakya tries to win over Rakshasa, a minister of the Nandas, to Chandragupta Maurya’s side. His other play *Devichandraguptam* centres on an incident in Gupta king, Ramagupta’s reign.

Narrative literature included *Panchatantra* (fifth-sixth centuries) and *Kathasaritasagara* (Ocean of Streams of Stories). They are collections of popular folk tales.

Biographies of well-known kings are an interesting piece of literature. These were written by court poets and writers in praise of their royal patrons. Banabhatta's *Harshacharita* (seventh century) talks in eulogistic terms about Harshavardhana of the Pushyabhuti dynasty. It is the oldest surviving biography in India. According to Bana, it is an *adhyayika*, a genre of texts related to *itihasa* tradition. It speaks highly of the king but at the same time, hints at the fratricidal struggle for the throne. Bilhana's *Vikramankadevacarita* (twelfth century) is about the Chalukyan king Vikramaditya VI.

Buddhist and Jaina Literature

Among the non-Brahmanical and non-Sanskritic sources of early India, Buddhist and Jain literature constitute an important category. Said to have been composed after the death of the Buddha, the Pali texts *Tripitakas* or the 'Three Baskets' tell us about the state of affairs in India at the time of the Buddha and sixteen *Mahajanapadas*. *Tripitakas* is the common name which is given to the Buddhist canonical literature and their commentaries in Pali language. The *Tripitakas* are in Pali, Chinese and Tibetan versions. They consist of three books — the *Sutta*, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma*. The *Sutta Pitaka* contains the discourses of the Buddha on various doctrinal issues in stories, poems and dialogue form. The *Vinaya* is about the 227 rules and regulations for monks and nuns of the *Sangha*. It includes explanations about the founding of each rule by the Buddha. It contains information about the Buddha's life, events and the story of Buddhism down to the first schism. It was written in 386 BCE. The *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (literally 'higher *Dhamma*') contains matter related to Buddhist philosophy in accordance with the *Theravada* school and contains lists, summaries and questions and answers. The *Sutta Pitaka* contains five *Nikayas* of which *Khuddaka Nikaya* is a collection of discourses. It contains *Theragatha*, *Therigatha* and *Jatakas* which are important sources for the historian. The *Jatakas* contain stories about the former births of the Buddha in the form of a *deva*, man, animal, fairy, spirit or a mythological character. Many stories and motifs were borrowed from pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist oral vernacular traditions. Due to their popularity they were transformed into sculptural bas-reliefs at Bharhut, Sanchi, Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati. They are important as they provide a glimpse into the history of Buddhism and popular Buddhism.

Theragatha (Verses of Elder Monks) and *Therigatha* (Verses of the Elder Nuns) are a collection of poems with verses which were narrated by the early members of the Buddhist *Sangha*. *Therigatha* is the first surviving poetry supposed to have been composed by women in India. Hence, it is important for not only Buddhism but also gender studies. The *gathas* of the *Therigatha* strongly support the view that women are equal to men in terms of spiritual attainment.

Non-canonical Buddhist literature includes *Milindapanha* (first century BCE-first century CE) which consists of a dialogue between Indo-Greek king Menander and a Buddhist monk Nagasena. The Sinhalese chronicles *Mahavamsa* ('Great History') and *Dipavamsa* ('History of the Island') entail the history of Buddhism

from the time of the Buddha's Enlightenment to third century BCE in India and fourth century in Sri Lanka.

Jaina literature constitutes another important category of texts which are in a form of Prakrit called Ardha Magadhi. The literature of the *Digambaras* is in Jaina Sauraseni while *Shvetambara* literature is in two dialects of Ardha Magadhi. Mahavira's teachings to his disciples were first compiled in 14 *Purvas*. In the fourth century BCE Stulabhadra convened a great council at Pataliputra and reconstructed the Jaina canon in 12 *Angas*. Later in the fifth century CE at a council at Valabhi, the existing texts were formalized and presented in written form. The scriptures accepted by the *Shvetambaras* are- 12 *Angas*, 12 *Upangas*, 10 *Prakirnas*, 6 *Chedasutras*, 2 *Sutras*, 4 *Mulasutras*. These texts deal with code of conduct, various legends, Jaina doctrines and metaphysics. The *Digambaras* believe that most of the original *Purvas* are lost. Hence, the *Digambaras* do not accept the scriptures accepted by the *Shvetambaras*. The *Digambaras* use the scriptures written by great *Acharyas* but based on the original teachings of Mahavira for their religious practices. We can use the Jaina literature for information on history and doctrine of Jainism, doctrines of rival schools, the life stories of the saints and life of the monks in the *sangha*.

From the above discussion it is clear that much of ancient Indian literature is religious in character. This became the basis of the notion that early India wrote no history. What the Indologists were looking for was an awareness of evidence, interest in causation, premium on chronology and sequential narrative in the early Indian Sanskrit texts. What they found instead was what they called fantasy, fables, religious idioms and exotic tales. Recent studies by scholars have attempted to unravel the ways some societies articulate a particular perspective of the past for varied reasons. Romila Thapar talks about one such tradition that is the *itihasa-purana* tradition in early India. She notes that it is important to realize the significance of the fact that some societies choose to record their past in particular forms. One such form is an embedded form of consciousness which needs to be prised out of the texts. These include origin myths, compositions in praise of heroes or genealogies of ancient descent groups. Some other texts have a more externalized form of history, such as biographies of rulers and those in authority, written in a recognizable form.

1.5.2 Archaeology

Archaeology is a branch of knowledge that studies material culture to understand the past. It has a close relation to history. Sculptures, pottery remains, bone fragments, house remains, temple remnants, coins, seals, inscriptions, floral remains like charred grains, ancient pollen and spores etc. constitute material culture that forms the subject matter of archaeology.

It is the archaeological evidence that has permitted us to study the prehistoric period. In India, even proto-historic period has been reconstructed on the basis of archaeology. However, we cannot limit the usefulness of archaeology to these periods alone; it is significant even for those periods which have written evidence, and which fall in the sphere of history proper. For example, the history of the Indo-Greeks has been reconstructed solely on the basis of coins.



Figure : Hoard of Mauryan Punch Marked Coins. Credit: CNG Coins.

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hoard_of_mostly_Mauryan_coins.jpg).

Archaeological methods like excavation and exploration are important as they provide significant amount of data on trade, state, economy, societal aspects, religion and such mundane aspects like how people lived, ate and clothed themselves. Excavations have provided immense amount of data bearing on the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Iron Age, Megalithic and many other cultures. Since Harappan script is still undeciphered, information about this period has been solely obtained from archaeology. It tells us about origin, spread, settlement patterns, town planning, trade, polity, economy, agriculture, hunting, crops, agricultural implements, technology, beads, seals, fire altars, religion and how this civilization declined.



Figure : Mauryan Ruins of Pillared Hall at Kumrahar of Pataliputra laid bare by Excavations.

Source: 1912-13 Archaeological Excavation by ASI/IEC at Pataliputra. Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumrahar#/media/File:Mauryan_ruins_of_pillared_hall_at_Kumrahar_site_of_Pataliputra_ASI/IEC_1912-13.jpg).

Coins

Coins have been found either in excavations as archaeological finds or as hoards. The study of coins is called **Numismatics**. Coinage is metal currency and has a definite shape, size and weight standard. It also bears the stamp of the issuing authority. The side of the coin which carries the message is called obverse and the opposite side is reverse. The 'Second Urbanization' in the early Indian history is the first instance where we find literary and archaeological evidence of coinage. This was the time of the emergence of States, growth of towns and cities, and spread of agriculture and trade. Coins in early India were made of copper, silver, gold and lead. Coin moulds made of burnt clay, dating to the Kushana period (first three centuries of the Common Era), have been found in hundreds. They point to the increased commerce during this time.

Most of the coins belonging to major dynasties have been catalogued and published. The earliest coins in the subcontinent are Punch Marked Coins. These are mostly of silver and sometimes of copper. With the expansion of Magadhan empire, the Magadhan type of Punch marked coins replaced those which were issued by other states. Though the earliest coins carried only symbols, the later ones had figures of king, divinities and also mention their dates and names. For example, Western Kshatrava coins give dates in Shaka era. The area of circulation of coins has enabled us to reconstruct the history of several ruling dynasties. The coins offer valuable information on political organization. For instance, the coins of Yaudheyas and Malavas carry the legend '*gana*' which tell us about their non-monarchical form of polity. The image of ship on the Satavahana coins of the Deccan bears testimony to the significance of maritime trade.

Post-Maurya coins were made of lead, potin, copper, bronze, silver and gold. They were issued in large numbers, pointing to increased volume of trade during this period. The Guptas also issued a number of gold coins. Known as *dinaras*, they were well executed die-struck coins. The obverse depicts the reigning king in various poses. Coins of Samudragupta and Kumaragupta I show them playing the *vina*. In the post-Gupta period the gold coins declined in number and purity. This became the basis of the highly contested feudalism theory of R. S. Sharma who believed that debasement of coinage and increased use of cowries point to decline of trade and commerce in this period. This, of course, has its critics.



Figure : A Gupta Gold Coin Depicting Queen Kumaradevi and King Chandragupta I.
Credit:uploadalt.

Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Kumaradevi_and_King_Chandragupta_I_on_a_coin.jpg).

Inscriptions

The study of inscriptions is called **Epigraphy**. Inscriptions are carved on seals, copper plates, temple walls, wooden tablets, stone pillars, rock surfaces, bricks or images. The oldest inscriptions are in the Harappan script of c. 2500 BCE, which is still un-deciphered. The earliest deciphered inscriptions are the Ashokan inscriptions which have been found on rock surfaces and stone pillars all through the subcontinent. These epigraphs were first deciphered in 1837 by James Prinsep, a civil servant in the employ of the East India Company in Bengal. Most of these are in Brahmi and Kharosthi script. Ashokan inscriptions are in a fairly developed script and it is assumed that writing must have existed in the earlier period too. Potsherds with short inscriptions have been found in excavations at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka which can be dated to pre-Mauryan period of fourth century BCE. The first pure Sanskrit inscriptions appeared in first century BCE. The early inscriptions were a mixture of Prakrit and Sanskrit which by the fifth century CE were replaced by Sanskrit as the language of royal inscriptions.

Inscriptions are of various kinds. Ashokan inscriptions were royal orders pertaining to social, religious and administrative matters addressed to the officials or people in general. Lumbini pillar inscription of Ashoka is a commemorative inscription since it records the visit of the king to the Buddha's birthplace. Then, there are memorials like the *sati* stones or hero stones, some of which carry inscriptions. Donative inscriptions which record the erection of a temple or a shrine have been found in hundreds in the Deccan and south India in the early medieval period. Royal land grants like the copper plate grants are also donative records which record grants of land and other items to brahmanas and other beneficiaries. Inscriptions which eulogize their patrons begin with a *prashasti*. Examples are Hathigumpha inscription of Kharavela, a first century BCE/first century CE king of Kalinga (Odisha) and the Allahabad (Prayagraj) Pillar inscription of the Gupta king Samudragupta. Some inscriptions record the construction of a dam, reservoir, tank, well or charitable feeding house. The Junagadh (Girnar) inscription of *Shaka* ruler Rudradaman records the construction of a water reservoir called *Sudarshana* lake during the time period of Chandragupta Maurya, its completion during the reign of Ashoka and its repair in the second century CE. Apart from these different kinds of inscriptions we also find miscellaneous types such as labels, graffiti, religious formulae and writing on seals etc.

Inscriptions are a good source of political, social and economic history. They are valuable tools for the historian as they tell us about contemporary events and about the common people. The spread of inscriptions is taken as an indicator of the reigning king's domain. Many inscriptions contain useful information about genealogy, dynastic details and sometimes, names of even those kings who have been missed out in the main genealogies. Land grants of the Pallava, Chalukya and Chola period inform us about revenue systems, agricultural details and political structures.

Inscriptions have many more uses, for example, they help us to date the sculptures on which they occur; give us information about extinct religious sects like the *Ajivikas*; tell us about historical geography; history of iconography; art and architecture; history of literature and languages; and even performing arts like music. They are more reliable than the literary texts as they are not always religious in nature.

1.5.3 Foreign Accounts

Many travellers came to India as pilgrims, traders, settlers, soldiers, and ambassadors. They have left behind accounts of places they visited and things they saw. If studied with due caution, these accounts give a lot of valuable information.

The Greek writers mention Sandrokottas who is said to have met Alexander as a young man. In the eighteenth century, William Jones identified Sandrokottas with Chandragupta Maurya which formed the basis of Mauryan chronology. Seleucus's envoy, Megasthenes, wrote the *Indica*, an account of his stay at the court of Chandragupta Maurya where he was the Greek ambassador. Though this text is no longer there, subsequent writers refer to certain portions of it and it has been possible to reconstruct the administrative structure, social classes and economic activities of the Mauryan period. Greek and Roman accounts give useful information about the Indian Ocean trade in early India. *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (80-115 CE) and Ptolemy's *Geography* (150 CE), both written in Greek, give information about geography and ancient trade. Early Greek and Latin works by Strabo, Arrian, Pliny the Elder tell us about Oceanic trade.

Of the pilgrims, mention may be made of Fa-Hsien and Huien Tsang, who were Chinese Buddhist monks who visited India and have left behind travel accounts. They visited many holy places and Buddhist shrines. Fa-Hsien's travels lasted from 399-414 CE and were confined to Northern India. Huien-Tsang left his home in 639 CE and spent over ten years travelling in India. Fa-Hsien has described the social, religious and economic conditions during the Gupta's and Huien Tsang during Harshavardhana's times.



Figure : A Depiction of Chinese Monk Huien Tsang on his Journey to India.

Tokyo National Museum. Source: Wikimedia Commons (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9a/Xuanzang_w.jpg).

In later periods, Arabs scholars such as Al-Beruni, who belonged to the region of Khive (modern Turkmenistan) visited India to learn about its people and study Indian texts in their original language. His *Tahqiq-i-Hind* is truly encyclopaedic in nature and covers topics like Indian scripts, sciences, geography, astrology, astronomy, philosophy, literature, beliefs, customs, religions, festivals, rituals, social norms and laws. His work is a valuable source for eleventh century India and he was the first to have identified the initial year of the Gupta Era. Arabs and Indians were involved in Oceanic trade and Arab accounts such as that of Sulaiman mention India.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) What is a *Veda*? Discuss the four *Vedas* briefly.
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- 2) What is archaeology? Enumerate the main archaeological sources for the reconstruction of ancient Indian history.
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1.6 SUMMARY

The Himalayas in the north and the ocean in the south, south-west and south-east create a superficial view of the isolation of the Indian sub-continent. Cultural influences have been exchanged across these frontiers and there have been maritime contacts with the west, West Asia and Southeast Asia. Internally, even the rugged, difficult terrain of Central India has not really impeded the movement of ideas and influences between the varied regions of the country. Admittedly, geography and environment influence historical development considerably, even if they do not determine it entirely.

Inscriptions tell us a lot about historical events which occurred at a specific time and place. However, inscriptions and literary texts mostly represent the voice of the elite — the kings, brahmanas, court poets etc. Here archaeological sources come to the rescue. They may voice the sentiments of what the common folks felt, saw and lived. Excavations, particularly, are a useful source. Still, we need to study archaeological evidence in relation to literary evidence. Many a times if we juxtapose these two categories of evidence, we find that each corrects and substantiates the other and a more complete picture can be arrived at.

1.7 KEY WORDS

Archaeology	: The study of material remains to understand the past.
Chalcolithic	: a cultural stage post-Neolithic which is characterized by the use of stone and copper.
Environment	: The surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal or plant lives or operates.
Eulogy	: A speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something highly, a kind of tribute.
Geographical determinism	: How the physical environment predisposes society and states towards particular development trajectories.
Harappan Civilization	: The civilization which flourished in the Indo-Gangetic plains from c. 2600-1800 BCE, having main cities like Harappa, Mohenjodaro, Lothal, Kalibangan among many.
Human Ecology	: The relationship between humans and their natural, social and built environments.
Nuclear regions	: Those regions which are transformed by historical and cultural developments into perennial centres of power.
Palaeobotany	: The study of fossil plants. This is a branch of Palaeontology dealing with the recovery and identification of plant remains from geological contexts and their use for the biological reconstruction of the past.
Salination	: The process of increasing the salt content of the soil.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) The main physiographic divisions of India are — Himalayan Uplands, Indo-Gangetic Plains and Peninsular India (for details see Section 1.2).
- 2) Here you will be discussing the nature of regions. The regions can be seen as Perennial nuclear regions, Areas of relative isolation and Areas of isolation. You will have to discuss the characteristics of each. See section 1.4.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) The word *Veda* is derived from the root 'vid' which means 'to know'. The *veda* means knowledge. There are four Vedas: *Rigveda*, *Samveda*, *Atharvaveda* and *Yajurveda* (for details see Sub-section 1.5.1).

- 2) Archaeology is that branch of knowledge that studies material culture in order to understand the past. Excavations, explorations, coins and inscriptions are the main archaeological sources for the reconstruction of ancient Indian history (for details see Sub-section 1.5.2).

1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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