

History of India up to 1206AD (18BHI13C)

UNIT 1

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1. Geographical Features- Unity in Diversity

India is a land of unity in diversity. The Indian peninsula has all the variety of relief features which makes India a remarkable country. The Himalayas in the North act like sentinels and separate us from Tibet and China. The Karakoram Range, Vindhya Range in the Central Indian region and the Satpura Range in the eastern Gujrat, The Aravali Range in Rajasthan and the Western Ghats are known as Sahyadris make these regions different from the Plains which are found in the northern plains and are called Indo-Gangetic Plains. On the basis of the soil, texture, vegetation and the regions these are broadly divided into the Bhabhar Belt, The Terai Belt, the Bangar Belt and the Khadar belt. The Thar desert stretches in the west and covers almost 6 percent area of the state of Rajasthan. Malwa plateau in the west, Deccan plateau in the south and Chota Nagpur plateau in the east make the Central Highlands of India. Coastal areas in the west and extreme south and in the east make India a peninsula. Also, there are islands of Lakshadweep, Andaman, and Nicobar make union territories.

Geographically India can be divided into four regions. The first is the Himalayan region or the Northern Mountain wall that extends from Kashmir in the West to Assam in the East. This region includes Kashmir, Kangra, Tehri, Kumaun Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. The second region is the great and big Northern Plains which are provided with water by the rivers like Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra and their tributaries. Due to this the region is most fertile and productive. The third region comprised of the plateau of the Central India and the Deccan. The Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats are stretched on the two sides of the Deccan which meets at the Nilgiris. The Coromandal Coast stands between the Eastern Ghats and the Bay of Bengal. The region between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats is known as the Konkan up to Goa beyond which it is known as Kanara or Karnataka while the Southern most part is known as the Malabar Coast or Kerala. The ancient names of Western Ghats were Sahyadri while that of Eastern Ghats, Mahindra. Undivided India is as large as Europe without Russia. India contains about one fifth of the total population of the whole world.

Thus the physical features of the country with its numerous rivers and lofty mountains favour a speculative bent of mind among the people living in these geographical regions. This geographical feature promoted the growth of composite culture of the country.

India – Unity in Diversity

The extra ordinary characteristic of this land is that in-spite of all diversity in different fields-physical, social, linguistic, cultural and religious; there is a fundamental thread of unity in the

history of India. India has been able to project itself as a single territorial unit in the face of physical, political, social and economic contrasts. The unifying role of the Great Plains between the Himalayan ranges on one hand and the Peninsular India on the other can hardly be ignored. Climatically, the monsoonal rhythm of seasons provides a strong element of uniformity. The concentration of monsoonal rainfall to a few months in a year and the associated agricultural activities are an all India phenomena. Many of our cultural traditions are strongly tied to the monsoons. Our saints have spread the message of universal brotherhood which has helped a great deal in uniting different sections of society in India and making the country a unified nation.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have produced themes even for tribal dances and music for thousands of years and still continue to do so. Although Hinduism is the way of life for majority of Indians, Hinduism and Islam are intertwined into a composite matrix that integration of India is strongly rooted. In fact there are almost as many Muslims in India as in Pakistan. Centuries of foreign rule failed to disrupt our cultural ties. On economic front, the development of inter-regional linkage and the emergence of a national home market have played a significant role in uniting the country. For example, tea from Assam, wheat from Punjab and Haryana, minerals from Chotanagpur plateau and spices from the hill areas of the southern states are used all over the country and in turn these areas obtain items required by them from other areas. This process has been accelerated by rapid development of transportation and communication. The following are some of the features or phenomena make India as a land of unity in diversity:

Geographical Unity:

From the very ancient part the whole of India as a geographical unit has been described as Bharata Varsha or the land of Bharat. This very name is given to the whole country in the Epics and Puranas. The country that lies north of the ocean and south of the snowy mountains is called Bharat for their dwell the descendants of Bharata. Its people are designated as Bharata santati. The term Bharata varsha stands for fundamental unity, the term was not only associated with the geographical boundaries but with the idea of universal monarchy. The theologians, political philosophers and poets have always referred to India as one and have highly praised the rulers who attempted to extend their political supremacy from Himalaya in the North to Cape Camorin in the South, from the river Brahmaputra in the East to Indus in the West. The rulers of the medieval period also considered India as one geographical unit and sought to extend their supremacy over this whole land. Even now this Geographical unity is reinforced

by the conception of common motherland “Bharatmata”. The song Vandemataram characteristically embodies this sentiment of unity.

Political Unity:

The sense of the unity of the whole country was promoted by politics also. The rulers of India established their sway over the whole country and consequently contemplated over it as a unit. The rulers of India from ancient times aimed to rule over the entire country and to become Chakravarti. Chandragupta, Asoka and Samudragupta had established their suzerainty over the whole of India and became Chakravarti. The institution of paramount sovereignty was a familiar political idea of the Hindus in ancient ages. The frequent use of the terms Rajadhiraj, Samraj, Eka-raja, Adhiraja, Virat, and Sarvabhauma etc. in the ancient Sanskrit literature and the repeated performance of such rites and sacrifices as the Rajasuya, Vajapeya, Punaraviseka, Mahabhisekha etc. show that the idea of universal conquest and an all India overlord-ship was well-known to the ancient Hindus. In the Medieval period Ala-ud-din Khilji, Akbar and Aurangzeb sought to establish their political supremacy over the whole of the country. The Mughals established an imperial system which deepened the conception of oneness of rule and sameness of political experience. The British also achieved the political and administrative unity of India. After the political emancipation of India, the incorporation of the Princely States in the Indian Union has completed this political unity of the country.

Religious Unity:

There is an under-current of religious unity among the various religious sects in the country. The worship of Vishnu and Siva under different names is as widespread in the North as in the South. The temples of Vishnu and Siva have been constructed all over the country. They raise their spires not only in the snow-covered Himalayas and Indo-Gangetic plains but in the deltas of the Tungabhadra, Kaveri and Krishna also. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been studied in the far South as well as in the Punjab, Kashmir and the Doab. The stories of Ram and Krishna are sung with much devotion and respect in the South, North, East and West. The Cow, the Vedas, the Gita, the Puranas and other scriptures are respected equally throughout the country. Monotheism, immortality of the soul, reincarnation. Karma, Moksha, Nirvana etc. are the doctrines believed in and followed by all the sects of the country. The most sacred places of Hindu pilgrimage such as Badrinarayan in the North, Dwaraka in the West, Rameswaram in the south and Jagannath Puri in the East embrace the whole of the country and they speak of India being one land. The daily prayer of the Hindus includes the names of all

the main rivers of the north and the south like the Indus (Sindhu), the Ganga, the Jamuna, the Godavari, the Saraswati, the Narmada and the Kaveri. This speaks of the fundamental unity of the people of India. These religious beliefs lay emphasis in the fact that India is one land.

Cultural Unity:

Indian culture and civilization are unique in its features. No doubt people follow different languages and customs but one can find a basic unity of literary ideas, philosophy, literature, and conventions throughout the country. The festivals like Diwali, Dashera, Rakshabandhan and Holi are celebrated in every part of the country. The cultural unity and the homogeneity are also reflected in the social ceremonies and the religious rites, festivals and modes of life which are the same in north, south, east and west. The sanctity of the family, the rules of the castes, the Sanskars, the rite of cremating a dead body, the cleanliness of the kitchen etc. are common to all the communities and sects of India.

Unity of Language:

India enjoyed unity of language. Before the Christian era Prakrit was a common language of the people. The message of the missionaries of Asoka was successfully carried in this language to the doors of his subjects. Subsequently Pali and Sanskrit replaced Prakrit language. Sanskrit has been acknowledged as one sacred language by all sections of the people irrespective of their race, rank and creed. Different sects and creeds have adopted Sanskrit as the sacred language of their scripture. Sanskrit has become the original source of different languages of the country like Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Oriya and Bengali etc. Sanskrit has always been the medium of philosophy, theology and mythology. During the time of the British rule English language achieved success in uniting the people of India when it was declared as the medium of instruction in all educational institutions and used as the official language. At present Hindi has been doing the same work. At different periods the Arayans, the Sakas, Scythians, Parthians and the Hunas have come to India. In course of time they had lost their separate individuality and were completely absorbed in the Hindu fold. Even large number of Muslims and Christians who have been living in India are the descendants of the Hindus who were converted to Islam and Christianity. All the races and tribes living in India have acquired the physical uniformity. Indian culture is an organic and harmonious synthesis of a large number of human cultural trends. Thus in spite of the appalling diversity India is herself the great example of the doctrine of one in many. There is unity in diversity —a unity for more profound than that produced either by geographical isolation or by political suzerainty. In India there is unity that transcends

the innumerable diversities of blood, colour, language, dress, manners and sects. The unique feature of Indian culture, civilization and its history lie in the continuity of religious practices and the spirit of tolerance by its people in all ages.

2 Pre- Historic Culture – Paleolithic and Neolithic

Human existence on the Indian soil is known from about the Pleis-tocene or the last Ice Age which goes back to two million years. Though we have not yet recovered a human skeleton of the early man, a paleolith or a stone tool used by the earliest Indian was discovered in 1863. Since then large quantities of artifacts have been discovered in different parts of India.

Paleolithic Culture

Hand axe, cleaver, chopper, flake, side scraper, and burin were some of the Paleolithic tools made by the early inhabitants of India. These tools make us believe that their makers led a hunter-gatherer life on a subsistence pattern. It is very likely that the habitants of India of this period subsisted on animals such as ox, bison, nilgai, chinkara, gazelle, black buck, antelope, sambar, spotted deer, wild boar, tortoise and fish, honey and plant foods like roots, seeds, fruits and leaves. Their subsistence pattern of living and social life can be inferred from the rock paintings and carvings.

The general time-frame for Paleolithic cultures in India can be bracketed between 40,000 BC to 10,000 BC. The cultural sequences from 10,000 BC to the start of the proto-historic phase are again geographically divided and from roughly 5000 BC they can be subdivided from sporadic findings into specific ecological zones with typical use of tool-technologies and distributive patterns resulting in stratified assemblages.

The cave paintings at Bhimbetka located on the Vindhyan range are a good means to infer the pattern of life of the earliest inhabitants. These paintings also reveal that they lived in small bands or groups, moving like nomads hunting and gathering food. We notice that as the climate and temperature became warm and dry, there were changes in fauna and flora, as also the pattern of life.

Mesolithic Culture

The tools they made became small. This phase, called Mesolithic is said to have started around 8,000 BC. In this phase, man in India lived by hunting, fishing and fowling. Rock paintings reflect the ecological and material changes that took place during this age.

We also come across both Paleolithic tools, like scraper, burin and choppers along with microliths ranging from one to eight centimetres like the blade, core, point, triangle, lunate and trapeze. In this phase, people led a life of subsistence. Their diet included meat and vegetables. Rock paintings found in sites like Bhimbetka, Adamgarh, Pratapagarh and Miijapur reflect the ecological and material changes.

Another factor of significance is that besides animals known to them, they painted what interested them – childbirth, child-rearing, burial ceremonies and sexual union. These evidences prove that by this time, social organization was taking stable shape and their religious beliefs started taking shape, influenced by ecological and material changes.

Further, the wide distribution and location of Mesolithic sites in different parts of India clearly indicate that they exploited varied environments such as sparsely wooded territories, sandy areas, and Vindhyan and Kaimur sandstone ranges, riverbanks and seacoasts. This suggests that they were adept in adapting themselves to changing ecological and material conditions, due to the need of the times.

Neolithic Culture

Sir John Lubbock, in *Prehistoric Times* (1865) coined the term Neolithic. Sir John used the term Neolithic to describe an age where the lithic artefacts were more skilfully made, more varied in form and were polished. Later V. Gordon Childe explained the Neolithic-Chalcolithic culture as a revolution that heralded a self-sufficient food producing economy.

Miles Burkitt described the practice of agriculture, domestication of animals, grinding and polishing of stone tools and the manufacture of pottery as the characteristics of the Neolithic age. In recent times, the term is used to denote a pre-metal age where there was an assured supply of food by producing cereals and domestication of animals, and where people led a settled life.

In spite of these changes, the most essential characteristics of Neolithic culture are the ground stone tools. Domestication of plants and animals led to other features like the emergence of village societies based on settled life, the beginnings of agricultural techniques, and man's control over nature and exploitation of natural resources for the sustenance of life.

The beginning of agricultural technology throughout the world was not uniform. It is suggested that the domestication of animals and plants by human beings began approximately in the Nile valley in 12,500 BC, in Western Asia from 8500 BC onwards, in Baluchistan from 6000 BC, in Belan valley in U.P. between 5440-4530 BC and in South India between 2500-

1500 BC. It is to be noticed that while in some place cultivation of cereals preceded domestication of animals and plants, in some other areas domestication of animals and plants was followed by agricultural operations. Thus, prehistoric Indian society also evolved from hunting-gathering stage to food producing or a rudimentary agricultural society.

3 Sources of Indian History

Sources of Indian history can be divided into two main groups. They are Archaeological and Literary. The Archaeological Source can again be divided into three groups, namely, Archaeological Remains and Monuments, Inscriptions and Coins. The Literary Source can also be divided into three groups, namely, Religious Literature, Secular Literature and Accounts of Foreigners. A brief account of these sources is given below.

Archaeological remains and Monuments:

Ancient ruins, remains and monuments recovered as a result of excavation and exploration are archaeological sources of history. The archaeological remains are subjected to scientific examination of radio-carbon method for its dates. Archaeological sources give us some knowledge of the life of the ancient people. India is rich with ancient ruins, remains, and monuments.

Many historical places are lying buried under the earth. But excavations are being carried out to bring some such places to light. The material remains discovered from excavations and ruins speak a good deal of the past. For example, the excavations at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa brought to the knowledge of the world the existence of the Indus Valley Civilization.

Excavations have been conducted at Taxila, Pataliputra, Rajgir, Nalanda, Sanchi, Barhut, Sarnath and Mathura. They are being done at many other places too. By digging the old sites and mounds, and discovering the material remains, historians try to understand the past. Archaeology is the science and method to explore and understand the ancient ruins and remains.

All over India there are countless historical monuments like, Temples, Stupas, Monasteries, Forts, Palaces, and the like, which speak of their time. Similarly, tools, implements, weapons and pottery etc. throw light on the living conditions of the people. For historians, these are sources of information. In the opinion of some eminent scholars, the history of India before the third century B.C. was mainly the result of archaeological research.

Information gathered from literature and oral traditions can be taken as historical accounts only if archaeological evidences are available as supporting material.

Inscriptions:

Inscriptions supply valuable historical facts. The study of inscriptions is called epigraphy. The study of the writings on ancient inscriptions and records is called palaeography. Inscriptions are seen on rocks, pillars, stones, slabs, walls of buildings, and body of temples. They are also found on seals and copper plates. We have various types of inscriptions. Some convey monarchical orders regarding administrative, religious and major decisions to the public in general.

These are called royal proclamations and commandments. Others are records of the followers of major religions. These followers convey their devotion on temple walls, pillars, stupas and monasteries. The achievements of kings and conquerors are recorded in prasastis, i.e. eulogies. These are written by their court poets, who never speak of their defects. Finally we have many donatives i.e. grants for religious purpose.

India's earliest inscriptions are seen on the seals of Harappa, belonging to the Indus Valley Civilisation. The most famous inscriptions of India are the huge inscriptions of Asoka. As that emperor himself proclaimed, he got his edicts engraved on stone so that they might last long. The Hatigumpha Inscription of Kharavela, the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, and many other rock and pillar inscriptions contain most valuable historical accounts. Political, administrative and religious matters are gathered from such sources.

Earliest inscriptions, namely, the seals of Harappa, dated about 2500 BC, have not been deciphered so far by any epigraphist. The later inscriptions were engraved in the Prakrit Language in the third century B.C. Ashokan inscriptions were written in the Brahmi script from left to right. Some were also engraved in the Kharosthi script from right to left. Sanskrit was used as an epigraphic medium in the second century A.D. Inscriptions were also engraved in regional languages in the ninth and tenth centuries.

For a study of Indus valley civilisation or the Harappan culture, archaeology is regarded as the chief source of information. The same archaeological evidences, collected from other parts of India, give a picture of the most ancient civilisation of India. To understand the pre-historic India, the historians must have to depend primarily on archaeology. The archaeological evidences also provide the most authentic information for writing the history of other subsequent periods.

Copper plates were more widely used for writing inscriptions. They are called Tamrapata or Tamrapatra or Tamrasasana. They were used even in the days of Buddha. Many copper plates contained land-grants. They were also used to carry administrative orders. The inscriptions are of many types. They were used for several purposes. For historians they carry enough interest.

Numismatic:

The study of coins is known as numismatics. Coins form another source of historical information. Ancient coins were mostly made of gold, silver, copper or lead. Coin moulds of Kushan period made of burnt clay have been also discovered. Some of the coins contain religious and legendary symbols which throw light on the culture of that time. Coins also contain the figures of kings and gods.

Some contain names and dates of the rulers. Coins also throw significant light on economic life of ancient people. They indicate regarding trade and commerce and help to reconstruct the history of several ruling dynasties. Coins have been the primary source of our information regarding the various Indian states during the same period.

The coins of the Kushana and the Gupta period give interesting accounts of those days. They throw light on religious, political, economic and commercial conditions. Every coin of the past has some story to convey.

Literary Sources:

1. Religious Literature:

History is not a record of only the rulers. It is mostly an account of the people's life and living. The literature of every time is like a mirror of that time. Mental and social conditions of the people are known from literary sources.

The Religious Literature of India is too vast. It includes the Vedas, the Upanishads, the great epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the Puranas of the Hindus. These are like mines of information about religious beliefs, social systems, people's manners and customs, political institutions, and conditions of culture.

The religious writings of the Jainas and the Buddhists are also enormous. They include the Jatakas and the Angas etc. While dealing with religious subjects, they also write about historical persons and political events. Contemporary economic and social conditions are vividly known from these sources.

2. Secular Literature:

There are many kinds of secular or non-religious literature. The law-books of ancient India known as Dharma sutras and Smritis belong to this group. They contain code of duties for kings, administrators, and people. They also contain rules regarding property, and prescribe punishments for murder, theft and other crimes.

Kautilya's Arthashastra is a famous work. It not only speaks of the State and polity, but also of socio-economic system. Authors like Patanjali and Panini, though they wrote Sanskrit grammar, also described some political events. The dramas of Kalidasa, Vishakhadatta, and Bhasa give us useful information about the people and society.

There were some historical writings too. Bana wrote Harshacharita or the Life of Harsha. Bilhana wrote about Vikramaditya. Kalhana's Rajatarangini was a historical text of great value. It is an account of the history of Kashmir. It presents the career of the Kings in chronological order. Chand Bardai wrote Prithviraj Charita. There are many other biographical works and chronicles which contain historical information.

Historians try to find correct material for history from all such literary sources.

3. Accounts of Foreigners:

From very ancient times, foreigners visited India. Some of them left valuable accounts of their travels or visits. Ancient Greek and Roman historians also wrote about India from their knowledge and information. All these foreign accounts prove useful for writing history.

We know of Chandragupta Maurya's victory over the Greeks from the Greek accounts. They mentioned him as Sandrokottas in their writings. The Greek ambassador Megasthenes stayed in the court of Chandragupta Maurya and wrote his famous work Indika. Unfortunately this work was lost. But fragments from it were preserved in the quotations by other Greek writers. But even those brief accounts are regarded most precious to know Mauryan polity and society.

From works such as Ptolemy's Geography, we know of India's ports and harbours. From Pliny's work we know of trade relations between Rome and India. These writers wrote in early centuries of the Christian era. The Chinese traveler Fa-Hien left valuable accounts on the time of the imperial Guptas. Hieuen Tsang, who is described as the 'Prince of Pilgrims' wrote details about the India of the age of Harsha. Another Chinese, Itsing, visited India in 7th century A.D. His accounts contain the socio-religious condition of those days.

Travellers from the Islamic world also visited India. Al Beruni who came at the time of Mahmud of Ghazani studied Sanskrit himself. His writings on 'Hind' give useful information.

History demands devotion to truth. Historians construct history from various sources to present the truth of the past to the men of today and the future.

4 Harappan Civilisation – Vedic Culture

Harappan Civilisation:

In 1921–22, the Archaeological Survey of India revealed the existence of a vast unique civilisation in the north west of India, with its two urban centres at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Later archaeologist dug out many other cities, such as Kalibangan, Kot Diji, Chanhudaro, Dholavira, Banawali, Sutkagendor, etc. Named after Harappa, the first site to be excavated, the entire civilisation is known as the Harappan civilisation.

Origin and evolution

The Harappan civilisation is dated between 2600 and 1900 BC. There were earlier and later cultures, known as Early Harappan and Later Harappan. The Harappan period characterised by seals, beads, weights, stone blades and baked bricks is called as the Mature Harappan culture. The Carbon-14 datings indicate the mature Harappan period to be from C. 2800/2900–1800 BC.

Geography

The Harappan civilisation was spread over Afghanistan, Sind, Beluchistan, Jammu, Punjab, northern Rajasthan, Kathiawar and Gujarat. The Kalibangan-Mohenjo-Daro represent the centre of the Harappan civilisation. Most of the Harappan settlements were located in this region.

Major centres

The most remarkable feature of Harappan civilisation was its urbanisation. The Harappan places which were small towns, show an advanced sense of town planning. The major centres are Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Kalibangan, Lothal, Sutkagen-Dor, Dholavira, etc.

Usually towns were laid out in a parallelogrammatical form. Each town was divided into a higher residential area where the essential institutions of civil and religious life were located and lower residential area where the urban population lived.

System town planning, drainage system, granary, dockyard, public bathing place, use of bricks, buildings, etc. are some of the most impressive achievements of the Harappan civilisation.

Agriculture

The Harappan cultivated wheat and barley, peas and dates, sesame and mustard. In Lothal cultivated rice as early as 1800 BC. The evidence of a furrowed field in Kalibangan indicates that the Harappans used some sort of wooden plough. The irrigation depended on the irregular flooding of the rivers of Punjab and Sind.

Crafts

Various sculptures, seals, pottery, gold jewelry and figurines in terracotta, bronze and steatite, etc, have been excavated from the sites of the Harappan civilisation. Other crafts that have been unearthed include shell works, ceramics, agate, glazed steatite bead making, special kind of combs, etc. The dancing girl and the bearded head from Mohenjo-Daro are the two well known pieces of art.

Science

The Harappans knew metal working and mining and constructing well planned multi storey buildings. They also knew to make long lasting paints and dyes.

Administration

It is not clear as to what sort of political administration the Harappans had. However the sheer range and volume of products utilised by the residents of the larger towns indicate a centralised authority, possibly which could be a class of merchants.

Religion

The various clay figures indicated that the Harappans worshipped the mother Goddess as the symbol of fertility. Certain trees seem to have been considered as sacred. Some people buried their dead in graves. The Harappans probably believed life after death, as their graves often contained household pottery, ornaments and mirrors belonging to the dead persons.

Decline

The Harappan civilisation did not come to a sudden end. Evidence indicates that it underwent a gradual process of de-urbanisation. Possibly, the over utilisation of resources and increase in population contributed the decline of Harappan civilisation.

Vedic Culture

The cities of the Harappan Culture had declined by 1500 B.C. Consequently, their economic and administrative system had slowly declined. Around this period, the speakers of Indo-Aryan language, Sanskrit, entered the north-west India from the Indo-Iranian region. Initially they would have come in small numbers through the passes in the northwestern mountains. Their initial settlements were in the valleys of the north-west and the plains of the Punjab. Later, they moved into Indo-Gangetic plains. As they were mainly a cattle-keeping people, they were mainly in search of pastures. By 6th century B.C., they occupied the whole of North India, which was referred to as Aryavarta. This period between 1500 B.C and 600 B.C may be divided into the Early Vedic Period or Rig Vedic Period (1500 B.C -1000 B.C) and the Later Vedic Period (1000B.C - 600 B.C).

Original Home of the Aryans

The original home of the Aryans is a debatable question and there are several views. Different scholars have identified different regions as the original home of the Aryans. They include the Arctic region, Germany, Central Asia and southern Russia. Bala Gangadhara Tilak argues that the Aryans came from the Arctic region on astronomical calculations. However, the theory of southern Russia appears to be more probable and widely accepted by historians. From there, the Aryans moved to different parts of Asia and Europe. They invaded India in about 1500 B.C. and came to be known as Indo-Aryans. They spoke the Indo-Aryan language, Sanskrit.

Vedic Literature

The word 'Veda' is derived from the root 'vid', which means to know. In other words, the term 'Veda' signifies 'superior knowledge'. The Vedic literature consists of the four Vedas - Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. The Rig Veda is the earliest of the four Vedas and it consists of 1028 hymns. The hymns were sung in praise of various gods. The Yajur Veda consists of various details of rules to be observed at the time of sacrifice. The Sama Veda is set to tune for the purpose of chanting during sacrifice. It is called the book of chants and the origins of Indian music are traced in it. The Atharva Veda contains details of rituals.

Besides the Vedas, there are other sacred works like the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, the Aranyakas and the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Brahmanas are the treatises relating to prayer and sacrificial ceremony. The Upanishads are philosophical texts dealing with topic like the soul, the absolute, the origin of the world and the mysteries of nature. The

Aranyakas are called forest books and they deal with mysticism, rites, rituals and sacrifices. The author of Ramayana was Valmiki and that of Mahabharata was Vedavyas.

Rig Vedic Age or Early Vedic Period (1500 - 1000 B.C.)

During the Rig Vedic period, the Aryans were mostly confined to the Indus region. The Rig Veda refers to Saptasindhu or the land of seven rivers. This includes the five rivers of Punjab, namely Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej along with the Indus and Saraswathi. The political, social and cultural life of the Rig Vedic people can be traced from the hymns of the Rig Veda.

Later Vedic Period (1000 - 600 B.C.)

The Aryans further moved towards east in the Later Vedic Period. The Satapatha Brahmana refers to the expansion of Aryans to the eastern Gangetic plains. Several tribal groups and kingdoms are mentioned in the later Vedic literature. One important development during this period is the growth of large kingdoms. Kuru and Panchala kingdoms flourished in the beginning. Parikshat and Janamejaya were the famous rulers of Kuru kingdom. Pravahana Jaivali was a popular king of the Panchalas. He was a patron of learning. After the fall of Kurus and Panchalas, other kingdoms like Kosala, Kasi and Videha came into prominence. The famous ruler of Kasi was Ajatasatru. Janaka was the king of Videha with its capital at Mithila. His court was adorned by scholar Yajnavalkya. Magadha, Anga and Vanga seem to be the easternmost tribal kingdoms. The later Vedic texts also refer to the three divisions of India - Aryavarta (northern India), Madhyadesa (central India) and Dakshinapatha (southern India).