

10. Ancient India : Cultural

10.1 Language and literature

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10.1 Language and literature

There was an uninterrupted literary tradition in Ancient India. This literature was produced in the Sanskrit, Ardhamagadhi, Pali and Tamil languages. It included religious literature, treatises on grammar, epics, plays, stories, etc.

Sangham Literature : ‘Sangham’ means a gathering of learned men. The literature compiled in such gatherings is known as ‘Sangham Literature’. It is the most ancient literature in Tamil. ‘Silappadhikaram’ and ‘Manimekhalai’ are two of its well-known epics. From Sangham literature, we learn about the political and social life in South India during the period.

Religious literature : The important texts include Agamgranth, Tipitaka and Bhagwad Gita.

The ‘Jain Agamgranthas’ are written in the Prakrit languages of Ardhamagadhi, Shauraseni and Maharashtri. The Agamgranthas are a collection of the teachings of Vardhaman Mahavir. Literary works like Mahapuranas, biographies, stories, etc. are available in the Apabhramsha language. Siddhasen Diwakar wrote ‘Sammaitutta’ a work in Prakrit, on jurisprudence. Vimalsuri has told the story of Rama in ‘Paumchariya’, a poetic work in Prakrit. Haribhadrasuri’s ‘Samaraichchakaha’ and Udyotansuri’s ‘Kavalayamalakaha’ are well known works.



Do you know ?

It is believed that most of the languages in the region from North India up to Maharashtra are derived from Prakrit and Sanskrit. The word ‘prakrit’ is derived from a word meaning ‘natural’. The prakrit languages were languages in daily use of the people. They can be divided into four groups, namely, the Paishachi, Shauraseni, Magadhi and Maharashtri languages. Marathi developed from Maharashtri. In this process of the development of modern languages like Marathi from the prakrit languages, their original forms changed. They are called ‘Apabhramsha languages’. Modern languages have developed from Apabhramsha languages.

Tipitaka has three *pitaka's* or parts. The word *pitaka* means a basket or collections. Here, it means a section. The Tipitaka is written in Pali. It consists of three categories of texts. **1. Sutta Pitaka :** It includes the texts of Gautama Buddha's teachings or sermons. They are called *suktas*. **2. Vinay Pitaka :** The word *Vinay* here means ‘rules’. The Vinay Pitaka gives the rules of behaviour which *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* in the *Bauddha Sangha* should follow in their day-to-day lives. **3. Abhidhamma Pitaka :** In this, Buddhist doctrine has been explained. A text titled ‘Attakatha’ (Arthakatha) which explains the Tipitakas, is well-known. Learned women composed *gathas* (narratives) about their own experiences. They have been compiled in the ‘Therigatha’. They are in the Pali language.

The ‘Bhagvad Gita’, which is a sacred



text of the Hindus, is a part of the Mahabharata. The Bhagvad Gita tells us that each one of us should do our duty without expecting rewards. It also says that the path of devotion to God is open to all.

Adi Shankaracharya lived during the eighth century CE. He emphasised knowledge and renunciation. He wrote commentaries explaining the 'Upanishads', 'Brahmasutras' and the 'Bhagvad Gita'. He established four *muths* in four directions of India at Badrinath, Dwarka, Jagannathpuri and Shringeri.



Adi Shankaracharya

Kautilya wrote the Arthashastra in which he discusses at length, what constitutes an excellent administrative system.

Treatises on Grammar : 'Ashtadhyayi' written by the grammarian Panini is considered to be the standard work on Sanskrit grammar. Patanjali wrote 'Mahabhashya'. It explains the principles given in Panini's 'Ashtadhyayi'.



Do you know ?

Arthashastra : This is a work by Kautilya. It consists of detailed discussions of administrative matters such as the duties of a king, criteria for selecting a minister, systems of defence, types of forts, the formation of an army, plans for espionage, organization of the treasury and other offices, judicial system, investigation of theft, types of punishment, etc.

Arsha and classical epics :

'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' are the two 'Arsha' epics of ancient India. 'Arsha' means composed by *rishis* or sages. The 'Ramayana' was composed by the *rishi* 'Valmiki'. The main character of Ramayana is Shriram. 'Mahabharata' has been composed by the Sage Vyas. Its main theme is the war between the Kauravas and Pandavas. It also tells us about Lord Krishna's life. The Mahabharata provides a comprehensive picture of the various human sentiments and emotions and their consequences.

Sometimes, there is such a period in the history of language, literature and art, that its glory remains undiminished even later on. The art, literature, etc. produced in such a period is said to be 'classical'. 'Raghuvansha' and 'Kumarsambhava' by Kalidasa, 'Kiratarjuniya' by Bharavi and 'Shishupalvadh' by Magha are well-known compositions of the ancient period written in classical Sanskrit.

Theatre : India has an ancient tradition of telling a story through songs, music and dance. These arts have been discussed in great detail in the 'Natyashastra' by Bharatmuni. When these arts are presented



with supporting dialogues, they are known as theatre. Among the ancient Sanskrit plays, 'Swapnavasavadutta' by Bhasa, 'Abhijnanshakuntal' by Kalidasa, etc. are famous.

Narrative Literature : In the ancient times, storytelling was used to educate people through entertainment. Gunadhya's 'Bruhatkatha' written in a language called 'Paishachi' is well-known. 'Panchatantra' composed by Pandit Vishnusharma is an excellent example of narrative literature. This text has been translated into many languages. Similarly, Baudhha Jataka tales are also very well-known.



Try this.

Choose a tale from the Panchatantra. Write a skit based on it and enact it.

10.2 Life of the people

The literature of ancient India sheds light on the way of life of the common people of the time. Those were prosperous times, due to the flourishing internal as well as foreign trade. The society was divided into different castes. There were organizations of traders as well as artisans. These organizations were called *shrenis*. Trade was carried out by sea as well as land routes. Indian goods like fine textiles, ivory, precious stones, spices, beautifully made earthen pottery were in great demand in foreign countries. The main crops were rice, wheat, barley and lentil (*masoor*). The diet of the people included food items made from these besides meat, fish, milk, ghee and fruits. The people mostly wore cotton garments, though silk and woollen garments were also worn. Their clothes resembled today's *dhoti*, *uparane*, *mundase*, *saree*, etc. The concept of stitching clothes was introduced in India during the Kushana period.

10.3 Science

Medicine : Indian medical science is known as 'Ayurveda'. It has a very old tradition. It seeks to understand the symptoms of an illness, its diagnosis and treatment. Also, much thought has been given to prevention of illness. Jeevaka was a well known *vaidya*, at the court of King Bimbisara. The 'Charaka Samhita' contains detailed information about clinical diagnosis and pharmacy. It was written by Charak. The famous surgeon Sushruta has discussed the diagnosis of different ailments and their remedies in his treatise the 'Sushruta Samhita'. The importance of this text is that it discusses the different causes leading to injuries, fractures, their types and the various types of surgeries required for them. The text was translated into the Arabic language and was called 'Kitaab-e-susud'. Vagbhata also wrote many books on medical science. The 'Ashtang-sangraha' and 'Ashtang-hridayasamhita' are the most important of them. The *Bauddha bhikkhu*, Siddha Nagarjuna in his book 'Rasaratnakara' describes various chemicals and metals.

Mathematics and Astronomy : The ancient Indians had studied Mathematics and Astronomy at great depth. Indians were the first to use the numerals 1 to 9 and zero. They invented the concept of decimal system in which the value of a digit changes according to its place *ekam*, *daham*, (units, tens) etc. The scientist Aryabhata wrote the book 'Aryabhatiya', which included many formulae for mathematical operations. Aryabhata was also an astronomer. He stated that the earth revolves around the sun. Varahmihir wrote the famous text 'Panchasidhantika' in the sixth century AD. This text discusses principles of Indian astronomy along with the principles of astronomy from the Greek, Roman and Egyptian civilizations. The



texts of the mathematician Brahmagupta who lived in the seventh century CE, were translated into the Arabic language.



Do you know ?

Kanad : Kanad wrote the book called 'Vaisheshik Darshan'. It mainly discusses *anu* and *paramanu*. According to Kanad, the universe is full of innumerable objects. These objects are nothing but the different forms of '*anu*'s. These forms might change but the *anu* remains unchanged.

10.4 Centres of education

There were many famous centres of education in ancient India. Students from other countries also came there for their studies.

Takshashila University : Takshashila was an important city on the ancient Indian trade route. Today, it is in Pakistan. Archaeological evidence found there suggests that the city was established in the sixth century BCE. Jeevaka, a contemporary of Gautama Buddha and a famous *vaidya*, had studied at Takshashila University. By the fourth century BCE, the fame of the university had spread far and wide. Chandragupta Maurya the founder of the Maurya Empire was educated at this university. The grammarian Panini and the *vaidya* Charaka were also students of Takshashila University. The Greek historians who accompanied Alexander have also given a description of the university. They have stated that such a university did not exist anywhere in Greece. The famous Chinese *Bauddha bhikkhu*, Fa Hien who came to India around 400 CE also visited the Takshashila University. The university provided education in various subjects such as Vedic

literature, Buddhist philosophy, economics, logic, etc.

Varanasi : The river Ganga has two tributaries – Varana and Asi. The city located between them came to be called Varanasi. Since ancient times, it has had centres which provided education in the areas of Vedic as well as Jain and Buddhist philosophy.

Valabhi : Valabhi was an ancient city in Saurashtra, Gujarat. From the fifth to the eighth century CE, it was an important centre of Jain and Buddhist philosophy. Yuan Chwang and Itsing, the Chinese *Bauddha bhikkhus* had visited Valabhi.

Nalanda University : The remains of the ancient Nalanda University can be found near today's Patna city in Bihar. Emperor Harshavardhan made generous donations to this university. According to the descriptions of Yuan Chwang and Itsing, Nalanda University could accommodate thousands of students. The library stocked thousands of books. Students seeking admission to the university had to appear for an examination at the entrance gate.



The seal of the Nalanda Mahavihara

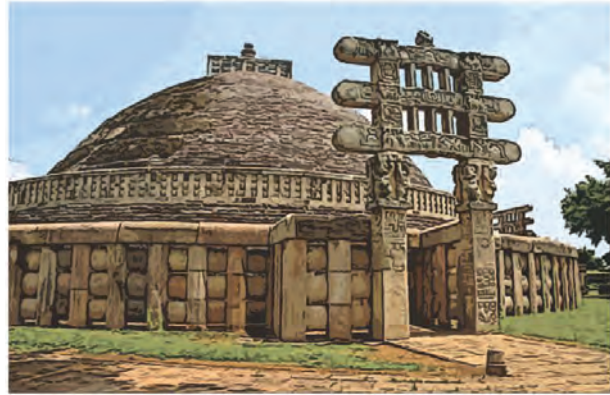
Vikramshila University : This university was located near today's Bhagalpur in Bihar. It was established by a king named Dharmapal in the eighth century CE. It had six *viharas*, each having its own separate entrance.



Kanchi : During the reign of the Pallava dynasty (sixth century CE), Kanchi in Tamil Nadu, emerged as an important centre of education. It was a centre for the teaching and learning of Vedic, Jain and Buddhist texts.

10.5 Art and architecture

Indian architecture reached its peak during the Maurya and the Gupta periods. The stone pillars erected by Emperor Ashoka at various places are excellent examples of Indian sculpture. The *stupa* at Sanchi and cave sculptures at Udayagiri, Khandagiri, Karla, Nashik, Ajanta, Ellora, etc. show that the same tradition advanced even further. The art of making images was developed during the Gupta period. Temple architecture developed during the reigns of the Chalukya and Pallava dynasties in South India. The temples of Mahabalipuram are a testimony to this architecture. The art of making bronze



The *stupa* at Sanchi

images of deities emerged during the period of the Pallavas. The iron pillar at Mehrauli near Delhi is evidence of the advanced knowledge of metallurgy of the ancient Indians.

Thus, it is clear that ancient Indian culture was very prosperous and advanced. In the next chapter, we will study India's contact with other civilisations and its far-reaching impact.



Bronze statue of Nataraj



The iron pillar at Mehrauli



Exercise

1. Answer in one sentence.

- (1) Make a list of ancient Indian universities.
- (2) Make a list of the Indian goods that were in demand in foreign countries.

2. Name the following.

Epics and poetic compositions of ancient India.

3. Fill in the blanks.

- (1) The epic Ramayana was composed by *rishi*
- (2) The science of Indian medicine is called
- (3) Thousands of students could live at the university.

4. Answer in brief.

- (1) Explain what is meant by 'Tipitaka'.
- (2) What is the message of the Bhagvad Gita?
- (3) What aspects does Ayurveda take into account?
- (4) What is meant by Sangham Literature?

5. Discuss.

Art and architecture of the Maurya and Gupta period.

6. What would you do?

- (1) How would you obtain information about Ayurvedic medicine and use it in your day to day life?
- (2) On a trip to a historical site, your friend is writing his name on the structure.

7. Observe the picture of the *stupa* at Sanchi and obtain more information about it.

Activity :

- (1) Obtain information from the elders in your family, about some special buildings in your neighbourhood.
- (2) Visit some historical buildings, memorials in your neighbourhood and write a note about the history you learn from the visits there.



The caves at Nashik