

# Prehistoric Age in India

Prehistoric Age refers to the time when there was no writing and development. It consists of five periods - Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic & Iron Age. It is one of the important topics under Ancient Indian History for [IAS Exam](#).

## Prehistoric India

### History

History (from the Greek word - Historia, meaning “inquiry”, knowledge acquired by investigation) is the study of the past. History is an umbrella term that relates to past events as well as the discovery, collection, organisation, presentation and interpretation of information about these events.

It is divided into pre-history, proto-history, and history.

1. **Pre-history** - Events that occurred before the invention of writing are considered pre-history. Pre-history is represented by the three stone ages.
2. **Proto-history** - It refers to the period between pre-history and history, during which a culture or organisation had not developed yet but has its mention in the written records of a contemporary literate civilisation. For example, the scripts of the Harappan civilization remains undeciphered, however since its existence is noted in Mesopotamian writing, it is considered part of proto-history. Similarly, Vedic civilisation from 1500-600 BCE is considered part of proto-history as well. Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures are also considered part of proto-history by archaeologists.
3. **History** - The study of the past after the invention of writing and the study of literate societies based on written records and archaeological sources constitute history.

## Construction of Ancient Indian History

The sources which help in reconstructing history are:

1. Non-literary sources
2. Literary sources - which include religious literature & secular literature

### Non-Literary Sources

- **Coins:** Ancient Indian currency was not issued in the form of paper but as coins. The earliest coins found in India contained only a few symbols, punch-marked coins made of silver & copper, but later coins mentioned the names of the kings, gods, dates, etc. The areas where they were found indicate the region of their circulation. This enabled to reconstruct the history of several ruling dynasties, especially Indo-Greeks who came to India from Northern Afghanistan and ruled India in 2nd and 1st BCE. Coins throw light on the economic history of different dynasties and also provide input on different parameters involved such as the script, art, religion of that time. It also helps in understanding the progress made in terms of metallurgy and science and technology. (The study of coins is called Numismatics).
- **Archaeology/Material remains:** The science which deals with the digging of the old mounds in a systematic manner, in successive layers and enables to form an idea of the material life of the people is

called Archaeology. Material remains recovered as a result of excavation and exploration are subjected to various kinds of examinations. Their dates are fixed according to radiocarbon dating. For example, excavated sites belonging to the Harappan period help us to know about the life of the people who lived in that era. Similarly, the Megaliths (graves in south India) throw light on the life of the people living in the Deccan and south India before 300 BCE. The history of climate and vegetation is known through an examination of plant residues, especially through pollen analysis.

- **Inscriptions/Prashastis** - (The study and interpretation of ancient inscriptions is called epigraphy). Writings engraved on hard surfaces such as stone and metals like copper which usually record some achievements, ideas, royal orders and decisions help in understanding different religions, and administrative policies of that era. For example, inscriptions detailing state policy issued by Ashoka and inscriptions recording the land grants by Satavahanas, kings of the Deccan.
- **Foreign accounts:** Indigenous literature can be supplemented by foreign accounts. To India came the Greek, Chinese and Roman visitors, either as travellers or religious converts, and left behind a rich account of our historical past. Some of the notables among them were:
  - Greek Ambassador Megasthenes wrote “Indica” and provided valuable information about the Mauryan society and administration.
  - “The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea” and “Ptolemy's Geography” both written in Greek give valuable information about the ports and commodities of trade between India and the Roman empire.
  - Fa-Hein, a Buddhist traveller, left a vivid account of the age of the Guptas.
  - Hsuan-Tsang, a Buddhist pilgrim, visited India and gave details of India under the reign of King Harshavardhana and the glory of the Nalanda University.

## Literary Sources

- **Religious Literature:** The religious literature throws light on the social, economic as well as cultural conditions of the ancient Indian period. Some of the sources are:
  - The Four Vedas - The Vedas may be assigned to c.1500 - 500 BCE. The Rigveda mainly contains prayers while the later Vedic texts (Samaveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda) comprise not only prayers but rituals, magic and mythological stories. Read more on the [four Vedas](#) in the linked article.
  - Upanishads - The Upanishads (Vedanta) contain philosophical discussions on “Atma” and “Paramatma”.
  - **Epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana** - Of the two epics, the Mahabharata is older in age and possibly reflects the state of affairs from the 10th century BCE to the 4th century CE. Originally it consisted of 8800 verses (called Jaya Samhita). The final compilation brought the verses to 1,00,000 which came to be known as the Mahabharata or Satasahasri Samhita. It contains narrative, descriptive and didactic material. The Ramayana originally consisted of 12000 verses which were later raised to 24000. This epic also has its didactic portions which were added later.
  - **Sutras** - Sutras contain ritual literature such as Shrautasutras (which include sacrifices, royal coronation) and Grihya Sutras (which include domestic rituals like birth, naming, marriage, funeral, etc.)
  - **Buddhist religious texts** - The early Buddhist texts were written in Pali language and are commonly known as Tripitaka (three baskets) - Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka. These texts throw invaluable light on the social and economic conditions of that era. They also make references to political events in the age of the Buddha. Read more on [Buddhism](#).
  - **Jaina's religious texts** - The Jaina texts commonly called “angas”, were written in the Prakrit language, and contain philosophical concepts of the Jainas. They contain many texts which help to reconstruct the political history of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the age of Mahavira. The Jaina texts refer repeatedly to trade and traders. Read more on [Jainism](#).

- **Secular Literature:** There is also a large body of secular literature such as:
  - **Dharmashastras/Law books** - These lay down the duties for different varnas as well as for the kings and their officials. They prescribe the rules according to which property is to be held, sold and inherited. They also prescribe punishments for persons guilty of theft, murder, etc.
  - **Arthashastra** - Arthashastra of Kautilya reflects the state of society and economy in the age of the Mauryas.
  - **Literary work of Kalidasa** - The works of the great poet Kalidasa comprises kavyas and dramas, the most important being Abhijnanasakuntalam. Besides being creative composition, they give an insight into the social and cultural life of northern and central India in the age of the Guptas.
  - **Rajatarangini** - This is the famous book written by Kalhana and depicts the social and political life of 12th century CE Kashmir.
  - **Charitas/Biographies** - Charitas are the biographies written by court poets in admiration of their rulers such as Harshacharita written by Banabhatta in praise of King Harshavardhana.
  - **Sangam literature** - This is the earliest south Indian literature, produced by poets who assembled together (Sangam), and provides valuable information about the social, economic and political life of the people living in deltaic Tamil Nadu. This Tamil literature contains literary gems such as 'Silappadikaram' and 'Manimekalai'. Read more on [Sangam Literature](#) in the linked article.

## Prehistoric Periods in India - According to Tools

Ancient history can be divided into different periods according to the tools used by people then.

1. Paleolithic Period (Old Stone Age): 500,000 BCE – 10,000 BCE
2. Mesolithic Period (Late Stone Age): 10,000 BCE – 6000 BCE
3. Neolithic Period (New Stone Age): 6000 BCE – 1000 BCE
4. Chalcolithic Period (Stone Copper Age): 3000 BCE – 500 BCE
5. Iron Age: 1500 BCE – 200 BCE

### Stone Age

The stone age is the prehistoric period, i.e., the period before the development of the script, therefore the main source of information for this period is the archaeological excavations. Robert Bruce Foote is the archaeologist who discovered the first palaeolithic tool in India, the *Pallavaram handaxe*.

On the basis of geological age, the type and technology of stone tools, and subsistence base, the **Indian stone age is classified primarily into three types-**

- Palaeolithic age (old stone age): Period - 500,000 - 10,000 BCE
- Mesolithic age (late stone age): Period - 10,000 - 6000 BCE
- Neolithic age (new stone age): Period - 6000 - 1000 BCE

### Palaeolithic Age (Old Stone Age)

The term 'Palaeolithic' is derived from the Greek word 'palaeo' which means old and 'lithic' meaning stone. Therefore, the term Palaeolithic age refers to the old stone age. The old stone age or palaeolithic culture of India developed in the Pleistocene period or the Ice Age, which is a geological period of the age when the earth was covered with ice and weather was so cold that human or plant life could not survive. But in the tropical region, where ice melted, the earliest species of men could exist.



## Main characteristics of the Palaeolithic age -

1. The Indian people are believed to have belonged to the 'Negrito' race, and lived in the open air, river valleys, caves and rock shelters.
2. They were food gatherers, ate wild fruits and vegetables, and lived on hunting.
3. There was no knowledge of houses, pottery, agriculture. It was only in later stages they discovered fire.
4. In the upper palaeolithic age, there is evidence of art in the form of paintings.
5. Humans used unpolished, rough stones like hand axes, choppers, blades, burins and scrapers.

Palaeolithic men are also called 'Quartzite' men in India as the stone tools were made of a hard rock called quartzite.

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

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

## Lower Palaeolithic Age (Early Palaeolithic Age)

- It covers the greater part of the Ice Age.
- Hunters and food gatherers; tools used were hand axes, choppers and cleavers. Tools were rough and heavy.
- One of the earliest lower Palaeolithic sites is Bori in Maharashtra.
- Limestone was also used to make tools.
- Major sites of lower Palaeolithic age
  - Soan valley (in present Pakistan)
  - Sites in the Thar Desert
  - Kashmir
  - Mewar plains
  - Saurashtra
  - Gujarat
  - Central India
  - Deccan Plateau
  - Chotanagpur plateau
  - North of the Cauvery River
  - Belan valley in UP
- There are habitation sites including caves and rock shelters.
- An important place is Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh.

## Middle Palaeolithic age

- Tools used were flakes, blades, pointers, scrapers and borers.
- The tools were smaller, lighter and thinner.
- There was a decrease in the use of hand axes with respect to other tools.
- Important middle Palaeolithic age sites
  - Belan valley in UP
  - Luni valley (Rajasthan)

- Son and Narmada rivers
- Bhimbetka
- Tungabhadra river valleys
- Potwar Plateau (between Indus & Jhelum)
- Sanghao cave (near Peshawar, Pakistan)

## Upper Palaeolithic age

- The upper palaeolithic age coincided with the last phase of the ice age when the climate became comparatively warmer and less humid.
- Emergence of *Homo sapiens*.
- The period is marked by innovation in tools and technology. A lot of bone tools, including needles, harpoons, parallel-sided blades, fishing tools and burin tools.
- Major sites of Upper Palaeolithic age
  - Bhimbetka (South of Bhopal) - hand axes and cleavers, blades, scrapers and a few burins have been found here.
  - Belan
  - Son
  - Chota Nagpur plateau (Bihar)
  - Maharashtra
  - Orissa and
  - The Eastern Ghats in Andhra Pradesh
  - Bone tools have been found only at cave sites of Kurnool and Muchchatla Chintamani Gavi in Andhra Pradesh.

## Mesolithic Period (Middle Stone Age)

The term Mesolithic is derived from two Greek words - 'meso' and 'lithic'. In Greek 'meso' means middle and 'lithic' means stone. Hence, the Mesolithic stage of prehistory is also known as the 'Middle Stone Age'.

Both Mesolithic and Neolithic phases belong to the Holocene era. In this era, there was a rise in temperature, the climate became warm which resulted in melting of ice and also brought changes in flora and fauna.

## Characteristic Features of the Mesolithic Era

- The people of this age lived on hunting, fishing and food gathering initially but later on they also domesticated animals and cultivated plants, thereby paving the way for agriculture.
- The first animal to be domesticated was the wild ancestor of the dog. Sheep and goats were the most common domesticated animals.
- The Mesolithic people lived in semi-permanent settlements along with occupying caves and open grounds.
- The people of this era believed in life after death and hence they buried the dead with food items and other goods.
- The characteristic tools of this era were **microliths** - the miniature stone tools usually made of cryptocrystalline silica, chalcedony or chert, both of geometrical and non-geometrical shapes. They were not only used as tools but were also used to make composite tools, spearheads, arrowheads, and sickles after

hafting them on wooden or bone handles. These microliths enabled the Mesolithic man to hunt smaller animals and birds.

- The Mesolithic men started to wear clothes made of animal skin.
- The Mesolithic people were art lovers and initiated rock art. The subject matter of these paintings was mostly wild animals and hunting scenes, dancing and food collection were also depicted in such paintings. These rock paintings give an idea about the development of religious practices and also reflect the division of labour on the basis of gender.
- The first human colonization of the Ganga Plains happened during this period.

### Important Mesolithic Sites

- Bagor in Rajasthan is one of the biggest and best-documented Mesolithic sites in India. Bagor is on river Kothari where microliths along with animal bones and shells have been excavated.
- Adamgarh in Madhya Pradesh provides the earliest evidence for the domestication of animals.
- There are about 150 Mesolithic rock art sites across India, with a rich concentration in Central India such as Bhimbetka caves (Madhya Pradesh), Kharwar, Jaora and Kathotia (M.P), Sundargarh and Sambalpur (Odisha), Ezhuthu Guha (Kerala).
- Microliths have also been found in some valleys of river Tapi, Sabarmati, Narmada, and Mahi.
- Langhnaj in Gujarat and Biharanpur in West Bengal are also important Mesolithic sites. Bones of wild animals (rhinoceros, blackbuck, etc.) have been excavated from Langhnaj. Several human skeletons and a large number of microliths have been recovered from these places.
- Though pottery is absent at most Mesolithic sites, they have been found in Langhnaj (Gujarat) and in the Kaimur region of Mirzapur (U.P).

### *Neolithic Period (New Stone Age)*

The term Neolithic is derived from the Greek word 'neo' which means new and 'lithic' meaning stone. Thus, the term Neolithic Age refers to the 'New Stone Age'. It is also termed as 'Neolithic revolution' since it introduced a lot of important changes in man's social and economic life. The Neolithic age saw man turning into a food producer from food gatherer.

### Characteristic Features of the Neolithic Age

- **Tools and Weapons** - The people used microlithic blades in addition to tools made of polished stones. The use of celts was especially important for ground and polished hand axes. They also used tools and weapons made of bones - such as needles, scrapers, borers, arrowheads, etc. The use of new polished tools made it easier for humans to cultivate, hunt and perform other activities in a better manner.
- **Agriculture** - The people of the Neolithic age cultivated land and grew fruits and corn like ragi and horse gram (kulati). They also domesticated cattle, sheep and goats.
- **Pottery** - With the advent of agriculture, people were required to store their food grains as well as to cook, eat the product, etc. That's why it is said that pottery appeared in this phase on a large scale. The pottery of this period was classified under greyware, black-burnished ware, and mat impressed ware. In the initial stages of the Neolithic age, handmade pottery was made but later on, foot wheels were used to make pots.
- **Housing and Settled Life** - The people of Neolithic age lived in rectangular or circular houses which were made of mud and reeds. Neolithic men also knew how to make boats and could spin cotton, wool and weave cloth. The people of the Neolithic age led a more settled life and paved the way for the beginning of civilization.



The neolithic people did not live far away from the hilly areas. They inhabited mainly the hilly river valleys, rock shelters and the slopes of the hills, since they were entirely dependent on weapons and tools made of stone.

### Important Neolithic Sites

- **Koldihwa and Mahagara (lying south of Allahabad)** - This site provides evidence of circular huts along with crude hand made pottery. There is also evidence of rice, which is the oldest evidence of rice, not only in India but anywhere in the world.
- **Mehrgarh (Balochistan, Pakistan)** - The earliest Neolithic site, where people lived in houses built of sun-dried bricks and cultivated crops like cotton and wheat.
- **Burzahom (Kashmir)** - The domestic dogs were buried along with their masters in their graves; people lived in pits and used tools made of polished stones as well as bones.
- **Gufkral (Kashmir)** - This neolithic site is famous for pit dwelling, stone tools and graveyards in houses.
- **Chirand (Bihar)** - The neolithic men used tools and weapons made of bones.
- **Piklihal, Brahmagiri, Maski, Takkalakota, Hallur (Karnataka)** - The people were cattle herders. They domesticated sheep and goats. Ash mounds have been found.
- **Belan Valley** (which is located on the northern spurs of the Vindhya and middle part of Narmada valley)
  - All the three phases i.e., palaeolithic, mesolithic and neolithic ages are found in sequence.

### *Chalcolithic Age (Stone Copper Age)*

The Chalcolithic Age marked the emergence of the use of metal along with stone tools. The first metal to be used was copper. The chalcolithic age largely applied to the pre-Harappan phase, but in many parts of the country, it appears after the end of the bronze Harappan culture.

### Characteristics of the Chalcolithic Age

- **Agriculture & cattle rearing** - The people living in the stone-copper age domesticated animals and cultivated food grains. They domesticated cows, sheep, goats, pig and buffaloes and hunted deer. It is not clear whether they were acquainted with the horse or not. People ate beef but did not take pork on any considerable scale. The people of the Chalcolithic phase produced wheat and rice, they also cultivated bajra. They also produced several pulses such as lentil (masur), black gram, green gram, and grass pea. Cotton was produced in the black cotton soil of the Deccan and ragi, bajra and several millets were cultivated in the lower Deccan. The people belonging to the stone-copper phase in the eastern regions lived mainly on fish and rice, which is still a popular diet in that part of the country.
- **Pottery** - The people of the stone-copper phase used different types of pottery, one of which is called black and red pottery and seems to have been widely prevalent in that era. The ochre-coloured pottery was also popular. The potter's wheel was used and painting with white linear designs was also done.
- **Rural settlements** - The people living in the stone age were characterised by rural settlements and were not acquainted with burnt bricks. They lived in thatched houses made of mud bricks. This age also marked the beginning of social inequalities, as chiefs lived in rectangular houses while the commoners lived in round huts. Their villages consisted of more than 35 houses of different sizes, circular or rectangular in shape. The chalcolithic economy is considered as a village economy.
- **Art and Craft** - The chalcolithic people were expert coppersmiths. They knew the art of copper smelting and were good stone workers as well. They knew spinning and weaving and were well acquainted with the art of manufacturing cloth. However, they did not know the art of writing.

- **Worship** - Small clay images of earth goddesses have been found from the chalcolithic sites. It is thus possible to say that they venerated the Mother Goddess. In Malwa and Rajasthan, stylised bull terracottas show that the bull served as a religious cult.
- **Infant mortality** - Infant mortality was high among the Chalcolithic people, as is evident from the burial of a large number of children in West Maharashtra. In spite of being a food-producing economy, the rate of infant mortality was very high. We can say that the Chalcolithic social and economic pattern did not promote longevity.
- **Jewellery** - The Chalcolithic people were fond of ornaments and decoration. The women wore ornaments of shell and bone and carried finely worked combs in their hair. They manufactured beads of semi-precious stones such as carnelian, steatite, and quartz crystal.

### Important Chalcolithic Sites

- **Ahar (Banas valley, South Eastern Rajasthan)** - The people of this region practised smelting and metallurgy, supplied copper tools to other contemporary communities. Rice was cultivated here.
- **Gilund (Banas valley, Rajasthan)** - Stone blade industry was discovered here.
- **Daimabad (Ahmadnagar, Gujrat)** - The largest Jorwe culture site in Godavari valley. It is famous for recovery of bronze goods such as bronze rhinoceros, elephant, two wheeled chariot with a rider and a buffalo.
- **Malwa (Madhya Pradesh)** - The settlements of Malwa culture are mostly located on the Narmada and its tributaries. It provides evidence of the richest chalcolithic ceramics, and also spindle whorls.
- **Kayatha (Madhya Pradesh)** - The settlement of Kayatha culture was mostly located on the Chambal River and its tributaries. Houses had mud-plastered floors, pre-Harappan elements in pottery along with copper objects with sharp cutting edges were found.
- **Chirand, Senuar, Sonpur (Bihar), Mahishdal (West Bengal)** - These are the prominent chalcolithic sites in these states.
- **Songaon, Inamgaon and Nasik (Maharashtra)** - Large mud houses with ovens and circular pit houses have been discovered here.
- **Navdatoli (on Narmada)** - It was one of the largest chalcolithic settlements in the country. It was spread over 10 hectares and cultivated almost all food grains.
- **Nevasa (Jorwe, Maharashtra) and Eran (Madhya Pradesh)** - These sites are known for their non-Harappan culture.

### Prehistoric Period - Iron Age

- Arrival of the Aryans: Vedic Period
- Jainism, Buddhism
- Mahajanapadas: the first major civilisation on the banks of the river Ganga after the Indus Valley.