

# Prehistoric Period

## [UPSC Notes]

### What is the Prehistoric Period?

The Prehistoric Period attests to a period in which no signs of human activity or writing. Prehistory refers to that period's hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Civilization and activities began thousands of years ago, called prehistory. A three Age System was called because prehistory is typically divided into three ages- Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages are the three eras.

- These three ages provide fragments of evidence for ancient human activities. These are evolutionary eras in humanity's history.
- Prehistoric culture refers to human development and evolution that did take place before the introduction of writing.
- This historical period also is referred to simply as the Stone Age for convenience. By the age of our time, ancient sciences of geology, paleontology, anthropology, and archaeology had produced a large, complex body of knowledge about the history of the human mind.
- Recent discoveries and speculations can aid in understanding human nature and shed light on current problems if they are fully evaluated. For example, what function can reason serve in human existence?

### Prehistoric Period: Stone Age

The stone age in India was the first era in which shifts in human civilization were apparent. Stone was used, in addition to stone-made tools. The stone age is further split into the following three periods:

- 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

The Palaeolithic age in India is also referred to as the Old Stone Age. Humans seemed not to know farming or cooking techniques. Back ago, gathering and searching for food was the principal occupation. At this time, all the things utilized by man, including his home and hunting gear, were fashioned of stone. The timescale for this was 5,000 BC to 10,000 BC. It describes the salient features of the palaeolithic cultures of India.

### The Palaeolithic age's primary characteristics are:

- The Indians were believed to be part of the "Negrito" race and were believed to have lived outside, in river valleys, caves, and rock shelters.

- They fished and subsisted on food gathering; they devoured wild fruits and vegetables.
- Agriculture, pottery, and houses were unknown. Only later did they know there was the fire.
- Paintings from the upper Palaeolithic era are evidence of art's existence.
- Humans employed hand axes, choppers, blades, burins, and scrapers constructed of unpolished, rough stones.

### **Mesolithic age (middle stone age)**

For animal hunts, humans first used arrows and bows. Then, sharp weapons, also called microliths-pointed, are used to begin the hunt for small animals like fish. The timescale for this was between 10,000 and 6,000 BC.

#### **Mesolithic sites of importance:**

- One of India's biggest and best-preserved Mesolithic sites is Bagor in Rajasthan. Microliths and animal bones, including shells, have been found in Bogor on the Kothari River.
- The oldest evidence of animal domestication can be found at Azamgarh in Madhya Pradesh.
- A rich concentration of Mesolithic rock art sites may be discovered in Central India, such as the Bhimbetka caves (Madhya Pradesh), Kharwar, Jaora, and Kathotia (M.P.), Sundargarh and Sambalpur (Odisha), and Ezhuthu Guha (Kerala).
- Microliths have also been found in many basins of the river Tapi, Sabarmati, Narmada, and Mahi.
- The Mesolithic sites of Langhnaj in Gujarat and Biharanpur in West Bengal are also significant. From Langhnaj, bones of wild animals, notably rhinoceroses and blackbucks, have been found. In addition, these sites have yielded numerous human skeletons and many microliths.
- Even though most Mesolithic sites lack pottery, it has been found in Langhnaj (Gujarat) and the Kaimur region of Mirzapur (U.P.).

### **Neolithic age (new stone age):**

This era marks a significant shift in civilization. Human civilization began with the taming of plants and animals began. Then, the tools and equipment evolved. The time frame ranged from 6,000 BC to 1,000 BC.

#### **Necessary Neolithic Sites**

- Koldihwa and Mahagara, located in the south of Allahabad, are two locations where round huts and rudimentary hand-made pottery can be seen. Furthermore, there is proof of rice, which is the oldest rice known evidence anywhere in the world and not only in India.
- The earliest Neolithic site was Mehrgarh (Balochistan, Pakistan), where people lived in houses made of sun-dried bricks and cultivated crops like cotton and wheat.
- Burzahom (Kashmir) - People lived in pits and used implements made of polished stones in addition to bones; domestic dogs were buried with their masters in their graves.
- The neolithic site of Gufkral in Kashmir is known for its pit dwellings, stone tools, and indoor cemeteries.
- Neolithic men in Chirand (Bihar) employed bone-based tools and weapons.
- The people of Piklihal, Brahmagiri, Maski, Takkalakota, and Hallur (all in Karnataka) were cow ranchers. Sheep and goats were kept as pets. As a result, there are ash mounds that can be found.
- In the Belan Valley, located amid the Narmada Valley and between the northern spurs of the Vindhya Mountains, Ages from the palaeolithic, mesolithic, and neolithic periods can all be discovered in order.

## Prehistoric Period: Metal Age

The stone era has come to an end with the introduction of metal. The two ages that comprise the wide category of the metal age are as follows.

### **Bronze Period:**

The physicochemical characteristics of bronze, which were stronger and more resilient than other metals at the time, gave bronze-age civilizations a technological advantage. The first Egyptian witness was of this age. Copper and bronze were among the most prevalent metals during this time.

## Iron Age:

Iron Age: The "3 Age System" concludes at this age. The bronze era came to an end during this era. Iron was also used to build weapons throughout this time.

## India's Prehistoric Past

History is past research; the word biography is derived from the Greek word historian, which means "inquiry," or insights acquired by research. The term "history" relates to past events and the discovery, gathering, organization, presentation, and interpretation of data related to these events.

There are three divisions Prehistory, Protohistory, and History; they are as follows:

**Prehistory** - Before writing was created, historical occurrences were preserved verbally. The three stone ages represent prehistory.

**Proto-history** - the time between prehistory and history, whenever a culture or organization didn't yet exist but was mentioned inside the written accounts of an advanced culture. For instance, the writings of the Harappan civilization are still incomprehensible, but because Mesopotamian language records their existence, they belong to the category of proto-history. The Vedic civilization, which existed between 1500 and 600 BCE, is also considered primitive. Archaeologists also consider the Neolithic and Chalcolithic cultures as related to proto history.

**History** - The study of the past after writing was created and examining literate civilizations using primary sources and archaeological evidence.

## Constructing Indian History in Antiquity:

The following sources are useful in rewriting history:

- Non-literary source
- Literature sources, including both secular and religious works

### Non-Literary Sources:

**Coins:** The money used in the Indus Valley civilization was coins instead of paper. The oldest coins discovered in India were punch-marked pieces of silver and copper with only a few symbols; later, coins included names of kings, gods, dates, etc. The locations where they were found reveal the area in which they circulate. It made it possible to put together the chronology of several dynasties in power, especially the Indo-Greek rulers who migrated to India from Northern Afghanistan between the second and the first

centuries BCE. Coins provide information on various criteria, such as the time's script, art, religion, and the economics of various empires. It also aids in understanding the advances achieved in science, technology, and metallurgy.

**Archaeology/Material Remains:** Archaeology is the discipline of science concerned with the systematic, layer-by-layer excavation of ancient mounds to understand their material culture better. Different examinations are performed on the recovered physical remains due to excavation and investigation. Their ages have indeed been established using radiocarbon dating. For instance, archaeological sites from the Harappan era provide data about the people's way of life during that time. Similarly, the Megaliths (graves in south India) shed light on life before 300 BCE for people who lived in the Deccan and South India. Studying plant remains, particularly in the form of pollen, reveals data about previous climatic and vegetal changes.

**Prasastis/Inscriptions** - (The study and interpretation of ancient inscriptions are called epigraphy). Studying the different faiths and government practices of the time can be accomplished by studying writings carved on hard materials like rock and metals like copper. These writings usually chronicle certain achievements, ideas, royal orders, and judgments. For instance, inscriptions document property grants made by Satavahana Kings of the Deccan, and inscriptions reflect state policy issued by Emperor Ashoka.

**Foreign accounts:** Foreign accounting entries may be used to supplement indigenous writings. The Greek, Chinese, and Roman travelers to India—whether they were visitors or religious converts—left a rich chronicle of our past. Amongst them, a few of significance were:

In his book "Indica," Greek Ambassador Megasthenes shared significant facts about the Mauryan government and society.

The Greek-language works "The Author of the Erythrean Sea" and "Ptolemy's Geography," which describe the ports and commodities transported between India and the Roman Empire, include helpful info.

Buddhist traveler Fa-Hein Faxien, who flourished from 337 to 422 CE, left behind a detailed description of the Gupta era.

A Buddhist pilgrim called Hsuan-Tsang traveled to India and praised the splendor of the Nalanda University and India during the reign of King Harshavardhana.

## Literary Sources:

**Religious Literature:** The religious writings offer information on the Indus Valley civilization's social, economic, and cultural circumstances. Several of the sources include:

**There are four Vedas:** The Vedas might be dated between 1500 and 500 BCE. The Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda are later Vedic books that include rites, magic, myths, and prayers, whereas the Rigveda primarily consists of petitions.

**Upanishads:** The Vedanta texts, such as the Upanishads (Atma and Paramatma), offer philosophical discussions on such ideas.

**Epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana:** The Mahabharata is the older of the two epics and may reflect events from the 10th century BCE to the 4th century C.E. The Ramayana is indeed the younger of the two epics. It is supposed to contain 8800 verses (called Jaya Samhita). The Mahabharata, also called the Satasahasri Samhita, contained 100,000 verses in its final form. It includes didactic, descriptive, and narrative elements. The 12000 verses that make up the original version of the Ramayana were later increased to 24000. The pedagogical aspects that were eventually added to this epic are also there.

**Sutras:** Shrautasutras (which cover sacrifices and royal coronations) and Grihya Sutras were two examples of formal poetry found in sutras (which include domestic rituals like birth, naming, marriage, funeral, etc.)

**Buddhist holy books:** The earliest Buddhist texts, known as the Tripitaka (three baskets), were composed in the Pali language and consisted of the Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, and Abhidhamma Pitaka. These works offer a priceless understanding of that time's social and economic climate. They also refer to political events during the Buddha's lifetime. Try reading up on Buddhism.

**Jaina's religious texts:** The religious works of the Jainas, known as "angels," were composed in the Prakrit language and contained their philosophies. They have many texts that can be used to recreate the history of Mahavira's time in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Trade and traders are mentioned frequently in Jaina scriptures. Try reading up on Jainism.

## Secular Literature in the Prehistoric Period

There is also a sizable amount of secular literature, such as the

**Dharmashastras/Law books** define the obligations of the several varnas and those of the ruler and their officials. They lay the guidelines for how property must be owned, sold, and inherited. They also specify punishments for individuals who commit theft, murder, etc.

**The Arthashastra:** Authored by Kautilya, depicts both the economic and social climate of the Mauryan era.

Kalidasa's literary works include plays and kavya, with Abhijnanasakuntalam being the most significant of the latter. In addition to being artistic creations, they provide a window into central and northern India's social and cultural life during the Gupta era.

**Rajatarangini:** The well-known book Rajatarangini: authored by Kalhana, depicts Kashmir's social and political environment in the 12th century C.E.

**Biographies:** It is also known as charities and were written by court poets in adoration of their kings and queens. Banabhatta composed the Charita and Harshacharita in honor of King Harshavardhana.

**Sangam literature:** It is the earliest south Indian literature and contains important details on the social, economic, and political life of the people who resided in deltaic Tamil Nadu. It was created by writers who came together under the name Sangam. Such literary gems as "Silappadikaram" and "Manimekalai" can be discovered in Tamil literature. The article in the link has further data on Sangam Literature.

