

# NCERT Based Ancient Indian History Important Terminologies

# BRICKS, BEADS AND BONES

## THE HARAPPAN CIVILISATION

*Shamans* are men and women who claim magical and healing powers, as well as an ability to communicate with the other world.

Let us look, for instance, at the “proto-Shiva” seals. The earliest religious text, the *Rigveda* (compiled c. 1500-1000 BCE) mentions a god named Rudra, which is a name used for Shiva in later Puranic traditions (in the first millennium CE; see also Chapter 4). However, unlike Shiva, Rudra in the *Rigveda* is neither depicted as Pashupati (lord of animals in general and cattle in particular), nor as a yogi. In other words, this depiction does not match the description of Rudra in the *Rigveda*. Is this, then, possibly a shaman as some scholars have suggested?



Fig. 1.27  
A “proto-Shiva” seal

*Janapada* means the land where a *jana* (a people, clan or tribe) sets its foot or settles. It is a word used in both Prakrit and Sanskrit.

While most *mahajanapadas* were ruled by kings, some, known as *ganas* or *sanghas*, were oligarchies (p. 30), where power was shared by a number of men, often collectively called *rajas*. Both Mahavira and the Buddha (Chapter 4) belonged to such *ganas*. In some instances, as in the case of the Vajji *sangha*, the *rajas* probably controlled resources such as land collectively. Although their histories are often difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of sources, some of these states lasted for nearly a thousand years.

Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating *dhamma*, the principles of which, as we have seen, were simple and virtually universally applicable. This, according to him, would ensure the well-being of people in this world and the next. Special officers, known as the *dhamma mahamatta*, were appointed to spread the message of *dhamma*.

Asoka was the first ruler who inscribed his messages to his subjects and officials on stone surfaces – natural rocks as well as polished pillars. He used the inscriptions to proclaim what he understood to be *dhamma*. This included respect towards elders, generosity towards Brahmanas and those who renounced worldly life, treating slaves and servants kindly, and respect for religions and traditions other than one's own.

evident is that there was a growing differentiation amongst people engaged in agriculture – stories, especially within the Buddhist tradition, refer to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants, as well as large landholders. The term *gahapati* was often used in Pali texts to designate the second and third categories. The large landholders, as well as

## **Gahapati**

A *gahapati* was the owner, master or head of a household, who exercised control over the women, children, slaves and workers who shared a common residence. He was also the owner of the resources – land, animals and other things – that belonged to the household. Sometimes the term was used as a marker of status for men belonging to the urban elite, including wealthy merchants.

In a *gana* or a *sangha* there were not one, but many rulers and each one was known as a *raja*. These *raj*as performed rituals together. They also met in assemblies, and decided what had to be done and how, through discussion and debate. For example, if they were attacked by an enemy, they met to discuss what should be done to meet the threat. However, women, *dasas* and *kammakaras* could not participate in these assemblies.

**Kammakaras were landless agricultural laborers in ancient India who worked on other people's land and performed various farming tasks. The term "kammakara" also means "work-man" or "laborer".**

## 4.1 Chiefs and kings in the south

The new kingdoms that emerged in the Deccan and further south, including the chiefdoms of the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in **Tamilakam (the name of the ancient Tamil country, which included parts of present-day Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, in addition to Tamil Nadu)**, proved to be stable and prosperous.

Kaveri is the most fertile. Chiefs and kings who controlled the river valleys and the coasts became rich and powerful. *Sangam* poems mention the *muvendar*. This is a Tamil word meaning three chiefs, used for the heads of three ruling families, the Cholas, Cheras, and Pandyas (see Map 7, page 87), who became powerful in south India around 2300 years ago.



## The earliest Tamil compositions

Some of the earliest works in Tamil, known as *Sangam* literature, were composed around 2300 years ago. These texts were called *Sangam* because they were supposed to have been composed and compiled in assemblies (known as *sangams*) of poets that were held in the city of Madurai (see Map 7, page 87). The Tamil terms mentioned above are found in *Sangam* literature.

exercised control over other cultivators. Early Tamil literature (the Sangam texts) also mentions different categories of people living in the villages – large landowners or *vellalar*, ploughmen or *uzhavar* and slaves or *adimai*. It is likely that these differences were based on differential access to land, labour and some of the new technologies. In such a situation, questions of control over land must have become crucial, as these were often discussed in legal texts.

northern parts of the subcontinent. In the Tamil region, large landowners were known as *vellalar*, ordinary ploughmen were known as *uzhavar*, and landless labourers, including slaves, were known as *kadai siyar* and *adimai*.

Histories of the Gupta rulers have been reconstructed from literature, coins and inscriptions, including *prashastis*, composed in praise of kings in particular, and patrons in general, by poets. While historians often attempt to draw factual information from such compositions, those who composed and read them often treasured them as works of poetry

An *agrahara* was land granted to a Brahmana, who was usually exempted from paying land revenue and other dues to the king, and was often given the right to collect these dues from the local people.

...  
We confer on (him) the following exemptions typical of an *agrahara* ... (this village is) not to be entered by soldiers and policemen; (it is) exempt from (the obligation to provide) grass, (animal) hides as seats, and charcoal (to touring royal officers); exempt from (the royal prerogative of) purchasing fermenting liquors and digging (salt); exempt from (the right to) mines and *khadira* trees; exempt from (the obligation to supply) flowers and milk; (it is donated) together with (the right to) hidden treasures and deposits (and) together with major and minor taxes ...”

Sometimes, guilds or *shrenis*, organisations of craft producers and merchants, are mentioned as well. These guilds probably procured raw materials, regulated production, and marketed the finished product. It is likely that craftsmen

Many craftsmen and merchants now formed associations known as *shrenis*. These *shrenis* of craftsmen provided training, procured raw material, and distributed the finished product. Then *shrenis* of merchants organised the trade. *Shrenis* also served as banks, where rich men and women deposited money. This was invested, and part of the interest was returned or used to support religious institutions such as monasteries.

Successful merchants, designated as *masattuvan* in Tamil and *setthis* and *sathavahas* in Prakrit, could become enormously rich. A wide range of

➔ Epigraphists have translated the term *patedaka* as reporter. In what ways would the functions of the *patedaka* have been different from those we generally associate with reporters today?

In the northern part of the country, the village headman was known as the *grama bhojaka*. Usually, men from the same family held the position for generations. In other words, the post was hereditary. The *grama bhojaka* was often the largest landowner. Generally, he had slaves and hired workers to cultivate the land. Besides, as he was powerful, the king often used him to collect taxes from the village. He also functioned as a judge, and sometimes as a policeman.

- Some important administrative posts were now hereditary. This means that sons succeeded fathers to these posts. For example, the poet Harishena was a *maha-danda-nayaka*, or chief judicial officer, like his father.
- Sometimes, one person held many offices. For instance, besides being a *maha-danda-nayaka*, Harishena was a *kumar-amatya*, meaning an important minister, and a *sandhi-vigrahika*, meaning a minister of war and peace.
- Besides, important men probably had a say in local administration. These included the *nagara-shreshthi* or chief banker or merchant of the city,



the *sarthavaha* or leader of the merchant caravans, the *prathama-kulika* or the chief craftsman, and the head of the *kayasthas* or scribes.

**THEME  
THREE****KINSHIP, CASTE AND CLASS**

EARLY SOCIETIES  
(C. 600 BCE-600 CE)

Other rulers, such as the Shakas who came from Central Asia, were regarded as **mlechchhas**,

## The case of the merchants

Sanskrit texts and inscriptions used the term *vanik* to designate merchants. While trade was defined as an occupation for Vaishyas in the Shastras, a more complex situation is evident in plays such as the *Mrichchhakatika* written by Shudraka (c. fourth century CE). Here, the hero Charudatta was described as both a Brahmana and a *sarthavaha* or merchant. And a fifth-century inscription describes two brothers who made a donation for the construction of a temple as *kshatriya-vaniks*.

as “untouchable”. In sharp contrast to the purity aspect, some activities were regarded as particularly “polluting”. These included handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks, designated as *chandalas*, were placed at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Their touch and, in some cases, even seeing them was regarded as “polluting” by those who claimed to be at the top of the social order.

probably composed by charioteer-bards known as *sutas* who generally accompanied Kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and composed poems celebrating their victories and other achievements. These compositions circulated orally. Then, from the fifth century BCE, Brahmanas took over the story and began to commit it to writing. This was the time

### 2.3 Debates and discussions

We get a glimpse of lively discussions and debates from Buddhist texts, which mention as many as 64 sects or schools of thought. Teachers travelled from place to place, trying to convince one another as well as laypersons, about the validity of their philosophy or the way they understood the world. Debates took place in the *kutagarashala* – literally, a hut with a pointed roof – or in groves where travelling mendicants halted. If a philosopher succeeded in convincing one of his rivals, the followers of the latter also became his disciples. So support for any particular sect could grow and shrink over time.

## Six Schools of Indian Philosophy

Over centuries, India's intellectual exploration of truth has come to be represented by six systems of philosophy. These are known as *Vaisheshika*, *Nyaya*, *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Purva Mimansa* and *Vedanta* or *Uttara Mimansa*. These six systems of philosophy are said to have been founded by sages Konada, Gotama, Kapila, Patanjali, Jaimini and Vyasa, respectively. These philosophies still guide scholarly discourse in the country. German-born British

The first teacher belonged to the tradition of the **Ajivikas**. They have often been described as **fatalists**: those who believe that **everything is predetermined**. The second teacher belonged to the tradition of the **Lokayatas**, usually described as **materialists**. Texts from these traditions have not survived, so we know about them only from the works of other traditions.



## Fatalists and materialists?

Here is an excerpt from the *Sutta Pitaka*, describing a conversation between king Ajatasattu, the ruler of Magadha, and the Buddha:

On one occasion King Ajatasattu visited the Buddha and described what another teacher, named **Makkhali Gosala**, had told him:

“Though the wise should hope, by this virtue ... by this penance I will gain karma ... and the fool should by the same means hope to gradually rid himself of his karma, neither of them can do it. Pleasure and pain, measured out as it were, cannot be altered in the course of *samsara* (transmigration). It can neither be lessened or increased ... **just as a ball of string will when thrown unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike will take their course and make an end of sorrow.**”



And this is what a philosopher named Ajita Kesakambalin taught:

“There is no such thing, O king, as alms or sacrifice, or offerings ... there is no such thing as this world or the next ...

A human being is made up of the four elements. When he dies the earthy in him returns to the earth, the fluid to water, the heat to fire, the windy to air, and his senses pass into space ...

The talk of gifts is a doctrine of fools, an empty lie ... fools and wise alike are cut off and perish. They do not survive after death.”



*tirthankaras* – literally, those who guide men and women across the river of existence.

*Hagiography* is a biography of a saint or religious leader. Hagiographies often praise the saint's achievements, and may not always be literally accurate. They are important because they tell us about the beliefs of the followers of that particular tradition.

were known as *Tipitaka* – literally, three baskets to hold different types of texts. They were first transmitted orally and then written and classified according to length as well as subject matter.

The *Vinaya Pitaka* included rules and regulations for those who joined the *sangha* or monastic order; the Buddha's teachings were included in the *Sutta Pitaka*; and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* dealt with philosophical matters. Each

The Buddha taught that life is full of suffering and unhappiness. This is caused because we have cravings and desires (which often cannot be fulfilled). Sometimes, even if we get what we want, we are not satisfied, and want even more (or want other things). The Buddha described this as thirst or *tanha*. He taught that this constant craving could be removed by following moderation in everything.

According to Buddhist philosophy, the world is transient (*anicca*) and constantly changing; it is also soulless (*anatta*) as there is nothing permanent or eternal in it. Within this transient world, sorrow (*dukkha*) is intrinsic to human existence. It is by following the path of moderation between severe penance and self-indulgence that human beings can rise above these worldly troubles. In the earliest forms of Buddhism, whether or not god existed was irrelevant.

The Buddha emphasised individual agency and righteous action as the means to escape from the cycle of rebirth and attain self-realisation and *nibbana*, literally the extinguishing of the ego and desire – and thus end the cycle of suffering for those who renounced the world. According to Buddhist tradition, his last words to his followers were: “Be lamps unto yourselves as all of you must work out your own liberation.”



Soon there grew a body of disciples of the Buddha and he founded a *sangha*, an organisation of monks who too became teachers of *dhamma*. These monks lived simply, possessing only the essential requisites for survival, such as a bowl to receive food once a day from the laity. As they lived on alms, they were known as *bhikkhus*.

*bhikkhus* (the Prakrit word for renouncer)

Initially, only men were allowed into the *sangha*, but later women also came to be admitted. According to Buddhist texts, this was made possible through the mediation of Ananda, one of the Buddha's dearest disciples, who persuaded him to allow women into the *sangha*. The Buddha's foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami was the first woman to be ordained as a *bhikkhuni*. Many women who entered the *sangha* became teachers of *dhamma* and went on to become *theris*, or respected women who had attained liberation.

## The Therigatha

This unique Buddhist text, part of the *Sutta Pitaka*, is a collection of verses composed by *bhikkhunis*. It provides an insight into women's social and spiritual experiences.

## Buddhism in practice

This is an excerpt from the *Sutta Pitaka*, and contains the advice given by the Buddha to a wealthy householder named Sigala:

In five ways should a master look after his servants and employees ... by assigning them work according to their strength, by supplying them with food and wages, by tending them in sickness; by sharing delicacies with them and by granting leave at times ...

In five ways should the clansmen look after the needs of *samanas* (those who have renounced the world) and Brahmanas: by affection in act and speech and mind, by keeping open house to them and supplying their worldly needs.

In 1854, Walter Elliot, the commissioner of Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), visited Amaravati and collected several sculpture panels and took them away to Madras. (These came to be called the Elliot marbles after him.) He also discovered the remains of the western gateway and came to the conclusion that the structure at Amaravati was one of the largest and most magnificent Buddhist stupas ever built. By the 1850s, some of the slabs from Amaravati had begun to be taken to different places: to the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta, to the India Office in Madras and some even to London. It was

*mahachaitya*  
at Amaravati

## 9.1 Stories in stone

You may have seen wandering storytellers carrying scrolls (*charanachitras*) of cloth or paper with pictures on them and pointing to the pictures as they tell the story.

also developed. Bodhisattas were perceived as deeply compassionate beings who accumulated merit through their efforts but used this not to attain *nibbana* and thereby abandon the world, but to help others. The worship of images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas became an important part of this tradition.

## Hinayana or Theravada?

Supporters of Mahayana regarded other Buddhists as followers of Hinayana. However, followers of the older tradition described themselves as *theravadins*, that is, those who followed the path of old, respected teachers, the *theras*.

Some of these forms were represented in sculptures, as were other deities. Shiva, for instance, was symbolised by the *linga*, although he was occasionally represented in human form too. All such representations depicted a complex set of ideas about the deities and their attributes through symbols such as head-dresses, ornaments and *ayudhas* – weapons or auspicious objects the deities hold in their hands – how they are seated, etc.



## Assemblies in the southern kingdoms

The inscriptions of the Pallavas mention a number of local assemblies. These included the *sabha*, which was an assembly of *brahmin* landowners. This assembly functioned through sub-committees, which looked after irrigation, agricultural operations, making roads, local temples, etc.

The *ur* was a village assembly found in areas where the landowners were not *brahmins*. And the *nagaram* was an organisation of merchants. It is likely that these assemblies were controlled by rich and powerful landowners and merchants. Many of these local assemblies continued to function for centuries.



# Thank You!