

# HIS†ORY

## Buildings, paintings and Books

### Monuments of Ancient India

India in the ancient times was not only a great empire but also had great craftsmen and architects who built several prominent buildings. Some of the important architectural structures built were stupas, hollowed caves and beautifully carved temples.

#### Stupas

The word stupa means a mound. It is generally a mound like structure which contains the relics of Buddhist monks. Some of its features are:

- Stupas have a small box placed at their centre. This box contains the relics (teeth, hair, bones or ashes) or the things used by Lord Buddha or his followers.
- This box, known as the relic casket, was covered in earth. Later, it was covered by a dome like structure with a carved stone.
- A *pradakshina patha* was laid around the stupa which was surrounded with railings. Devotees walked in a clockwise direction around the stupa.
- Amravati and Sanchi are the two places where these magnificent stupas were built. Some of the stupas were built as early as 2000 years ago.



Remains of the Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh

#### Hollowed caves

- Buildings were hollowed out of rocks to build artificial caves.
- Their walls were painted with human and animal figures.
- Many walls of the hollowed caves were carved and various scenes from the life of the Buddha were depicted on them.



Various sculptures made on the walls of the Ajanta caves

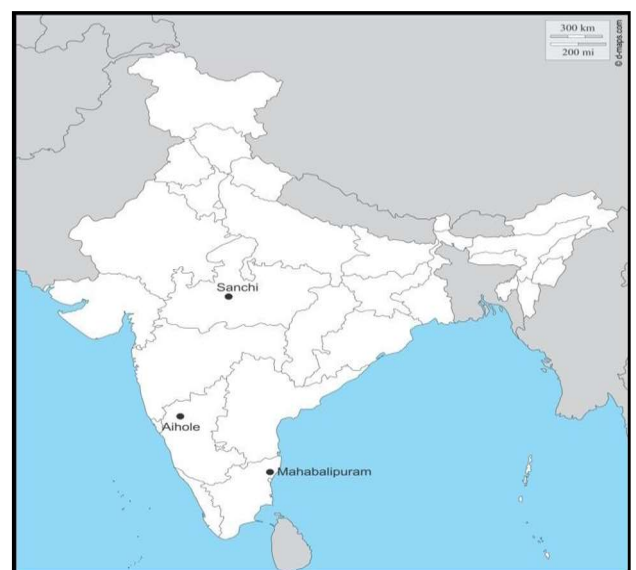
#### Temples

- In this period, many Hindu temples, with deities such as Vishnu, Shiva and Durga in them, were built.
- The garbhagriha was the most important part of the temple where the chief deity was kept. All the religious rituals took place here.
- Often, a shikhara or a tower was built on the top of the garbhagriha to mark the sacredness of the place.
- Many temples had a mandapa, a hall where people could assemble.
- Some of the remarkable stone temples were built at Mahabalipuram and Aihole.

#### The Construction of the Temples and Stupas

Many stages were involved in the construction of a temple and a stupa such as:

- The temples and the stupas were mostly built by the kings and the queens as their construction was very expensive.



Map of India showing Sanchi, Aihole and Mahabalipuram.

- First, the quality of the stone to be used was identified and then it was transported to the place where the temple was to be built.
- The stones were then shaped and carved into pillars and panels for walls, floors and ceilings and placed in the right positions.
- The money of the treasury was used for constructing the temples.
- Many a times, the gifts brought by the devotees were used for the decoration of the temples.
- Merchants, traders, farmers and other common people also paid for the buildings in their own capacity.



The Bhitargaon temple in Kanpur the oldest remaining terracotta made Hindu shrine with a shikhhar at the top.

## Paintings

The finest examples of paintings are the cave paintings of Ajanta and Ellora. Here many caves were hollowed out of the hills. Most of these caves were used as monasteries for Buddhist monks. The walls of many of the caves were decorated with paintings. The colours were made up of plants and minerals. As the caves are dark inside, most of the paintings were made in the light of torches. The paintings of this period are one of the greatest legacies of the ancient period.



A painting depicted on the wall of a cave at Ajanta

## Contributions in the Field of Writing

Many epics, great books on grammar and dramas were written during this period. Following are the most notable of them all:

- The Puranas, the religious stories of the Hindus were written during this period. These contain stories about Hindu gods and goddess. They were written in plain Sanskrit and could be read out to everyone including women and shudras.
- Two great epics written in Sanskrit- the Ramayana and the Mahabharata became very popular. While the Ramayana was written by Valmiki, the Mahabharata and the Puranas were written by Ved Vyas.
- Silappadikaram, was a famous Tamil epic which was written about 1800 years ago. It was composed by a Tamil poet named Ilango.
- Another Tamil epic, the Manimekalai was composed by Sattanar around 1400 years ago.
- Kalidasa, a famous court poet of the Guptas, wrote plays in Sanskrit. Meghdootam and Abhijyanam Shakuntalam are some of his best known plays.
- Panchtantra and Jataka tales contain various stories written during this period. Various Jataka stories were carved on the railings of the stupas and paintings in Ajanta.

## Contributions in the Field of Science

Following were the contributions of Indians in the field of science, technology and mathematics:

- Aryabhata was a mathematician and an astronomer. He wrote the book 'Aryabhatiyam', in which he explained the causes of the rotation and revolution of the Earth on its axis and calculated the circumference of a circle.
- The Indian numerals were spread into Europe by the Arabs. The symbol for 'zero' was also invented in India, which was in due time spread into Europe by the Arabs.

India, in the ancient times was thus famous for its art, architecture, literature, math and sciences.