1. Comment on the different sources for writing the history of ancient India.

Ans: When referring to Ancient India, the time period from c. 1200 BCE (Composition of the Rig Veda) to c. 554 CE (Collapse of the Gupta Empire) is usually considered. This period was a time of changes and innovations, of new religions and great empires, of migrations and intermixing and various other happenings. In this article we will discuss about the various ways in which we obtain information about this time period, the sources of ancient Indian history.

Sources of Ancient Indian History

Although there are other methods of classification, the most popular system divides the sources of this period into two categories: Archaeological Sources:
Archaeological sources refer to the sources which are obtained by the process of archaeological excavations. There are six sections which fall under archaeological sources. These are:

Inscriptions:
Inscriptions can be defined as writings on hard surfaces like stone, metal, on surfaces of structures, etc. The greatest advantage that inscriptions have over other media of writing are that they suffer a much reduced degree of wear and tear and thus survive for a much longer time. The earliest time from which inscriptions can be considered as the earliest evidences of the reading and writing.
Inscriptions also help in the study of evolution of scripts and languages, chronology, genealogy of kings (since inscriptions were usually financed by kings, their origins and names were mentioned), determining the boundaries of empires (through distribution of inscriptions) and religious beliefs of the state (the gods were usually honoured at the start of the inscription).

Coins:
The study of coins, or numismatics was one of the most important sources of ancient Indian history. For example, the entire history of Indo-Greek kings has been based on findings from coins. Legends on coins mention the ruler, date of issue, it may also contain the ruler’s regnal period, most coins also have a stamped image of the emperor on them. The oldest coins from ancient India are from the 6th Century BCE. Coins also help to know about the fiscal conditions in an empire. There are two theories regarding this. The first states that if purer gold is used to make coins, it shows a stronger economy and use of impure gold shows a weak economy. The second theory uses the frequency of coins for its analysis, if there are more coins circulating in the economy, it is taken to be proof that money economy has penetrated into society, which is linked with prosperity.

Excavated Material:
Although all archaeological sources are excavated material, when all finds are taken together in terms of the place where they are found, how deep underground they were found, and in terms of broad overview, it helps historians to draw conclusions about how history probably played out. For example, if Gupta and Kushana coins were found, it would help to determine their fiscal statuses and so on, but the information that they were discovered from the same site might suggest trade between them to a historian.

Architectural Remains:
Most surviving architectural remains of the period are religious buildings like Buddhist stupas, temples, man-made caves, etc. Incidentally, Buddhist stupas are the oldest surviving architectural remains in India. Buildings give an idea of technological advancement of the people (by observing building techniques) and also an idea of how powerful kings or emperors were.

Art (Paintings and Sculptures):
Rock paintings of the period have survived in the caves of Buddhist and Jain monks. These were usually depictions of facts observed from their day to day lives (and so can be used to form a view of how life was), however there were many scenes from the life of the Buddha and tales from the Jataka and other such books. Sculptures show the state of artistic technique and it shows gradual refinement through the years.

Literary Sources:
Literary sources are obtained from the various texts that were composed in ancient India. There is a plethora of sources from history, however almost all Indian texts have been heavily interpolated (additions were made to the text over time). Although such interpolation may be seen as negative, since it distorts the original text and makes it difficult to determine the truth, it also adds several layers to a text and allows historians to study the changes in society through time.

Religious Literature:
Most of the literature that can be used as sources of ancient Indian history are Hindu, Buddhist or Jain religious literature. Hindu literature was composed by the Brahmans, who were the ‘highest’ caste in the four-fold caste system of ancient India. Religious literature included the Vedas, the Vedangas, the Puranas, the Upanishads and Buddhist texts like the various Jatakas.

Secular Literature:
Secular literature were texts that did not focus on religion; epics, stories, poems, plays, etc fall under this category. The epics Mahabharat and Ramayan were secular literature. The difference that secular literature had was that it gave a view of society as it was, rather than how a religion wanted it or preferred it to be.

Accounts of Travellers:
Accounts of travellers provide a view of ancient Indian society from the eyes of foreigners. This is very important to understanding society as in many cases indigenous writers might not have mentioned day to day practices they considered trivial; however a foreigner would have found even mundane practices interesting or exciting and mentioned them. Xuanzang (came from China to study Buddhism) and Megasthenes (Seleucid ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya) were two famous travellers who wrote accounts of their visit to India.

2. How do we reconstruct the structure of the palaeolithic and early neolithic societies?