

The Story of India Begins

THE GREAT CIVILIZATIONS

The history of civilizations in India is believed to have started around 4000 years back with the advent of Indus Valley civilization in north-western parts of the then Indian subcontinent. It was a rich civilization and laid the foundation for generations to come by their efficient city planning systems. The grid-iron pattern for the planning of cities is still a lesson to learn and follow. The well-planned drainage system is the best known in history. The Indus buildings were generally constructed with sun-dried and sometimes kiln burnt bricks. Indus valley civilization has many examples of civil planning including houses, markets, offices, public baths, etc. all planned in gridiron pattern. There were some statuettes also built-in steatite and limestone. Other archeological remains can be listed as square steatite seals having animal rendering, storage jars made up of ceramic, toys having wheels, figurines, weapons of bronze, and sculptures. One of the significant remains found in Mohenjo-daro has a symmetrical arrangement of rooms around a courtyard. Some fire altars can also be witnessed at Lothal site.

The Indus people were followed by the “Vedic Civilization” or the “Classic Civilization” of Aryans in 1500 BC. They were excellent at military forces. The society was broadly divided into 4 groups, based on the works they performed. These categories were Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The religious activities involved *yogas* and *mantras* chanting. Perhaps this generated open spaces in their residences also. The buildings of Aryans introduced the trabeated method of construction. The Aryans also gave the

concept of “Vastu-Shastra”, which is adopted as the general criteria for spatial placement of different activities in the building even today. The focus during Vedic period was on residential buildings, as is witnessed through Rigveda. The commonly adopted terms were “grama” for settled space, “pur” for a fort or high tower, and “griha” for residence. “Griha” was adopted for family or joint family, whereas “grama” is a group of grihas. Various other terms are also used for “griha”, such as, griham, sadas, harmyam, Chaya, etc. indicating that each had a different style and size as well.

The residential units had an open-to-sky courtyard in the center position, that is very similar to the concept of Vaastu-Purush Mandala. These plans range from an ordinary house to mansions having multiple rooms. There were provisions for animals also in some of the huge houses. Another important term is “prasada”, i.e. palace having thousand doors and pillars. “Vasospati” is the god presiding over each residential unit. The period has also witnessed the 4 Vedas: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda and Samaveda, which later paved way for Hinduism. The buildings dedicated to both these civilizations were constructed with perishable materials, because of which no evidence of the structures exists today. The information collected from archeological excavations has been translated into words.

THE NORTHERN EMPIRES

Ashokan Empire

The 4th century BC was the advent of bureaucracy and an efficient Ashokan Empire. In 321 BC Chandragupta Maurya conquered Magadha, with Patliputra as its capital. His son Bindusara made efforts and later on, his grandson Ashoka established an all India empire. Kautilya’s Arthshastra has records stating the codes and laws regarding land revenue and taxation.

Some of the important features of the empire were:

- Agrarian economy.
- Tax generated by land revenue. Tax was also to be paid for any job.

- Well-paid officers (this helped in maintaining an efficient army).
- Ashoka established a vast empire which means good network of roads was required to connect the capital city Patliputra to various parts.

The Ashokan empire declined in 185 BC, i.e. 50 years after his death. Various reasons attributed to this decline such as weak army (because of Buddhist influence of non-violence), weak followers or successors, pressure on the agriculture for tax payment, etc. By this time the artisans and merchants were well established because of the trade routes and gradually gained so much strength that they could give threats to the officials. At the same time two religions, namely Buddhism and Jainism were also increasing their followers in numbers.

The Gupta Empire

Guptas were a family of wealthy landowners, established in Magadha. Fortunately Chandragupta (319 AD) married the Licchvi princess and gained importance. He was titled “Maharajadhiraj”—“Great King of Kings” and seated the throne of Magadha. He was followed by Samudragupta, Vikramaditya, Kumargupta and Skandagupta (467AD). The Guptas strengthened their empires by extending their personal relationships with other states. The art, architecture and performing arts reached its peak during their reign. There were musicians, artisans, sculptors, poets, philosophers whose work received the patronage of king. Their rule marked the beginning of a new trend, a new style and patronage and establishment of structures for the emerging religious beliefs of Hinduism. Perhaps this is why Gupta period is called “The Golden Age”.

Important features of the Gupta empire that had socio-logical impact on the development of religion are worth mentioning.

- The king was the most important but there were representatives of local people. Business with Malaysia, Southeast Asia, Cambodia and Thailand brought wealth and prosperity to the merchants. Spices, pearls, stones, perfumes, herbs, textiles, etc. were all exported. Some of



the wealth was also donated to the Buddhists which resulted in splendid caves at Ajanta during the reign of Guptas.

- Hinduism received patronage of the ruler and started growing both in number of followers as well as structures (starting from small shrines to huge massive structures).
- Literature was given due importance and important works like Ramayana and Mahabharata were turned into sacred works which perhaps led to more of idol worship and need of structures to house the Gods and Goddesses.
- Arithmetic and astronomy were emerging as skills and craftsmen displayed their work both in stone and iron.
- Brahmins became more important with the event of growth in Hinduism and were supposed to perform all the important rituals and functions in the temple. Shudras as they were the lower caste were underprivileged sections of the society. This discrimination in the society led to the concept of planning of cities to great extent. The best part of city was allotted for the important structures, palaces and temples.
- People had freedom to enjoy poetry, sculpting, music, etc.

By the end of 5th century AD, the Gupta power came to cease with the regular invasions from northwest and the empire broke up into small kingdoms, who were trying to prove their existence and resist the attacks. Finally, it all ended up, forcing the population to move towards south, in search of establishment. Small powers came up for short periods like the Palas in Bihar and Bengal, the Gurjara-Pratiharas in Malwa and Rajasthan.

THE CENTRAL AND THE SOUTHERN EMPIRES

Among the important rulers in the Deccan are the Chalukyans, who came to power in the middle of 6–8th century AD. The Chalukyans were then overthrown by the Rashtrakutas, towards the end of 8th century AD. Some of the finest examples of Deccan architecture are credited to the Chalukyans. Hoysalas also came into power but for a short period in the 12th century

AD. They added to the planning concepts of the temple planning. The star-shaped plans or the stellate plans are a gift of this period only. Elaborate ornamentation and carving was done on the temples.

The Tamil regions or the Dravidadesh were first controlled by the Pallavas in 6th century AD. Some historians date back this period to 3rd century also. The Pallavas also had to face revolts from time to time and finally gave way to Cholas in around 9th century AD. The Cholas were great admirers of art and architecture and patronized it. The Cholas had a better and more stable kingdom, under the reign of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I, perhaps because of which they could devote to the magnificent and splendid temples. Cholas expanded their empire and conquered Ceylon also. But the successors weakened and the power slowly ceased. They were replaced in the 13th century, by Pandyas, having their capital at Madurai. The Pandyas ruled for a short period and were occupied by Vijayanagar dynasty during 14th century. The empire of Vijayanagar also fell in the 15th century AD, after being defeated by Sultan rulers.

THE EARLY STRUCTURES

The early structures that were built during the empires were permanent in nature and long lasting. Because of this reason, the remains of the same can be witnessed today and studied to explore the architecture of ancient India. The terms structural and non-structural have been used to explain the two different types of structures. Structural buildings mean the man-made structures, which were created to house people, by putting or assembling the rocks/boulders or even bricks. Non-structural does not mean that the structures were not transferring load like those of partition walls in the present day context. Here, it simply means that they were produced from the natural living mountain cliffs, which were strong enough to house people, even if the rock beneath it is taken away.

In the category of permanent structures, the earlier ones were caves. These caves come under the category of non-structural or rock-cut structures. These were created for the people of all three religions, viz. Buddhist, Jain and Hindus

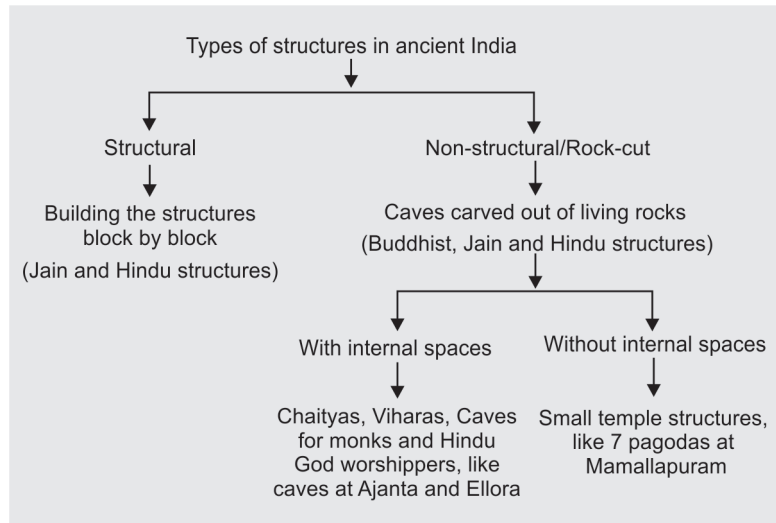


Fig. 1.1: Different types of structures in ancient India

during different time periods. The Buddhist and Jain caves were used for all purposes like living and praying, whereas the Hindu caves appear to be employed purely for religious purpose, i.e. praying only. The creation of these rock-cut structures is possible only because the religion received the patronage of the rulers of different ages. The artisans and workers were employed from time to time to work on these mountains and create wonders.

IMPACT OF AVAILABLE BUILDING MATERIALS

The availability of building material plays a vital role in creating a particular type of structure which becomes style of the region with the passage of time. In areas where stone was not available, the artisans worked in brick which was available in plenty, as in Bengal. The availability of hard natural living rocks helped them to create caves with internal spaces to live in, as they were not worried about the strength of the structure, like the Elephanta Caves, Udayagiri Caves, etc. The availability of hard granite stopped the Pallava artisans to produce fine detailing work. The soft stone available with the

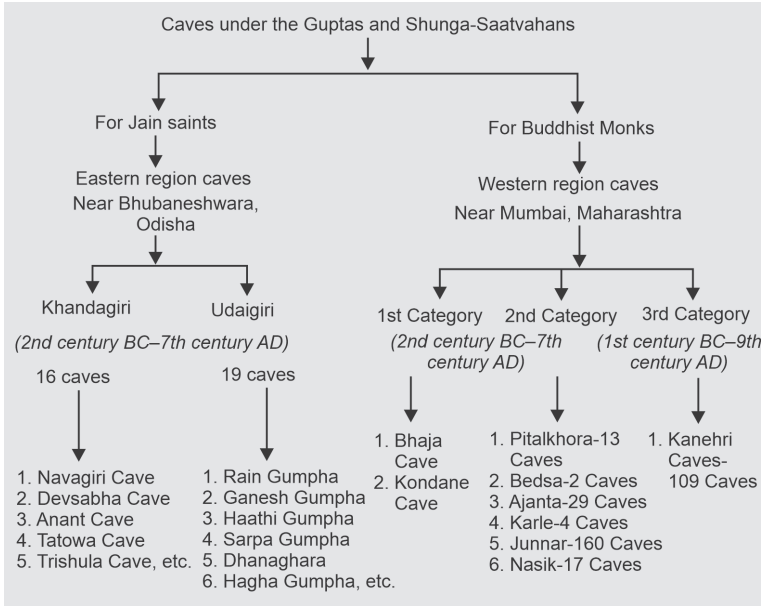


Fig. 1.2: Caves for Jain and Buddhism believers

Hoysala architects helped them to produce the intricately carved beautiful structures.

Hence, the beauty that is glorified today was a natural outcome of the available building resources with the artisans and workers of a particular region, which is a result of the geological factors.