

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Sources

Paper 1 · Unit 1

Archaeological, literary and foreign sources, and how to criticise each: 30 marks in four years, and the unit that underwrites every source question in Paper 1.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Sources: archaeological sources, exploration, excavation, epigraphy, numismatics, monuments; literary sources, indigenous, primary and secondary, poetry, scientific literature, literature, literature in regional languages, religious literature; foreign accounts, Greek, Chinese and Arab writers.

Archaeological sources

The physical record, and the only source type that is contemporary with the events it documents rather than written later.

- **Exploration and excavation** are distinguished in the syllabus, the first being surface survey and the second stratified digging, and **Mortimer Wheeler** introduced systematic stratigraphic method to India in the 1940s.
- **Archaeological Survey of India** was founded in 1861 under **Alexander Cunningham**, and **John Marshall** as Director-General oversaw the Harappan discoveries.
- **Dating methods** include stratigraphy, typology, **radiocarbon** for organic material, thermoluminescence for pottery, and dendrochronology where wood survives.
- **Epigraphy** is the study of inscriptions, and Indian inscriptions are on rock, pillar, copper plate, temple wall and seal, in Brahmi, Kharoshthi and their descendants.
- **James Prinsep** deciphered Brahmi and Kharoshthi in 1837, which unlocked the entire pre-Gupta epigraphic record and is the single most important event in Indian historiography.
- **Numismatics** supplies chronology, dynastic lists, portraiture, religious affiliation and economic information, and the Indo-Greek kings are known almost entirely from their coins.
- **Monuments** including stupas, temples, forts and caves give architectural sequence, patronage patterns and religious change, and they are frequently datable by inscription.
- **Limitations** are real: excavation is destructive and unrepeatable, only durable material survives, the record is biased towards the wealthy and the ritual, and interpretation is unavoidably theory-laden.

Indigenous literary sources

The largest body of material and the most difficult to use, since almost none of it was written as history.

- **Religious literature** includes the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, epics and Puranas on the Brahmanical side, the Tipitaka and Jatakas on the Buddhist, and the Agamas on the Jain.
- **Jatakas** are particularly valuable socially, since their stories of the Buddha's previous lives incidentally describe merchants, guilds, villages and everyday transactions.
- **Puranas** contain dynastic lists that are historically useful once their framing in cosmic ages is set aside, and they are the principal source for post-Mauryan dynastic succession.
- **Secular literature** includes Kautilya's Arthashastra on statecraft, the Dharmashastras on law, Sangam poetry, Kalidasa's plays and the Sanskrit kavya tradition.
- **Historical writing** proper is rare, and **Kalhana's Rajatarangini** of 1148 is the outstanding exception, since Kalhana states a method, weighs his sources and criticises earlier accounts.
- **Biographies** including Banabhatta's Harshacharita and Bilhana's Vikramankadevacharita are court panegyric rather than critical history, and they must be read for what they reveal incidentally.

- **Scientific literature** named in the syllabus covers the Aryabhatiya, the Brihat Samhita, the Charaka and Sushruta Samhitas, and it gives evidence on technology, medicine and cosmology.
- **Regional literature** in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and later the north Indian vernaculars extends the record beyond Sanskrit and often reflects social groups the Sanskrit sources ignore.

Foreign accounts

Asked in 2026 through the claim that Greek writers saw India politically, Chinese religiously and Arabs scientifically. That generalisation is broadly defensible and needs testing.

- **Greek writers** wrote in a political and ethnographic register, and **Megasthenes** at Chandragupta's court described administration, the capital and society, though his account survives only in quotation and contains demonstrable errors such as the seven castes.
- **Periplus of the Erythraean Sea** of about 60 CE and **Ptolemy's Geography** are commercial and geographical rather than political, which qualifies the generalisation about Greek writers.
- **Chinese pilgrims** travelled for religious purposes and their interests followed, so **Faxian** in the fifth century, **Hiuen Tsang** in the seventh and **Itsing** later all describe monasteries, relics, doctrine and monastic discipline in detail.
- Hiuen Tsang's **Si-yu-ki** is nonetheless the fullest single account of seventh century India, covering roads, cities, crops, administration and Harsha's court alongside its Buddhist subject matter.
- **Arab and Persian writers** did indeed bring a scientific and comparative interest, and **Al-Biruni's Kitab-ul-Hind**, written after study of Sanskrit around 1030, examines Indian religion, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics and social custom systematically.
- Al-Biruni states his method explicitly, distinguishing what educated Indians believe from popular practice, which makes him the most methodologically self-aware foreign observer of ancient or medieval India.
- **Later travellers** including Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Abdur Razzaq, Nicolo Conti and the Portuguese chroniclers extend the tradition into the medieval period.
- For the 2026 question, the generalisation holds broadly and should be qualified by the Periplus on the Greek side and by Hiuen Tsang's breadth on the Chinese, which is exactly the sort of nuance that distinguishes a strong answer.

Source criticism

The skill the whole unit is really testing, and the one that pays across every other unit in Paper 1.

- Ask **who wrote it, when, for whom and why**, since a court panegyric, a monastic chronicle and a merchant's handbook each distort in a different direction.
- **Distance in time** matters, so the Arthashastra's contested dating means it cannot be used as a straight description of Mauryan practice, and Buddhist accounts of Ashoka were written centuries after him.
- **Corroboration** across source types is the strongest method, and the Ashokan edicts, Megasthenes and the archaeological record together give a firmer picture of the Mauryas than any one alone.
- **Silence** is evidence but weak evidence, and the absence of Alexander from Indian sources tells us about Indian historiographical priorities rather than proving he did not come.

- **Official sources overstate**, so Abul Fazl's figures, Ashoka's claims and every royal prashasti should be read as statements of intent and self-presentation.
- **Pair hostile with friendly sources** wherever possible, so Abul Fazl with Badauni, and Barani's aristocratic hostility with Afif's different emphasis.
- **Archaeology and text** should be read against each other, and the disagreements are often more informative than the agreements, as with the granaries at Harappa or the Koldihwa rice dates.
- Recent papers reward this explicitly, since the 2023, 2025 and 2026 papers all asked questions where the correct answer is partly about the reliability of the source.

Sources for the medieval period

The syllabus places sources at the start of Paper 1, but the medieval half has its own source problems and Section B questions increasingly test them.

- **Persian chronicles** dominate, running from Minhaj-us-Siraj's Tabaqat-i-Nasiri through Barani, Afif and Isami to Abul Fazl, Badauni, Lahori and Khafi Khan.
- Almost all of them were written **by and for the court**, so they record the ruling elite's concerns and are close to silent on peasants, artisans and women.
- **Barani** is the most cited and the most treacherous, since he writes as an aggrieved aristocrat who believed office should be closed to the low-born, and his outrage is evidence of social mobility he disliked.
- **Malfuzat**, the recorded conversations of Sufi masters such as the Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad, are the best corrective, because visitors brought ordinary problems of debt, family and neighbours to the khanqah.
- **Inscriptions and coins** continue to matter, and the Mughal revenue statistics in the Ain-i-Akbari are the single largest quantitative source for any pre-modern Indian state.
- **Foreign travellers** of the medieval period, including Ibn Battuta, Nicolo Conti, Abdur Razzaq, Bernier, Tavernier and Manucci, describe what insiders took for granted, which is their particular value.
- **European company records** from the seventeenth century add commercial data of a precision no Indian source offers, including prices, wages, freight rates and cargo values.

Building the answer

Two questions in four years, on Alberuni's defects and on the three traditions of foreign writing. Both are pure source criticism.

- For a question on a **named source**, give its author, date, language, purpose and audience before you assess it, since assessment without those is guesswork.
- On **Al-Biruni's defects**, the honest list is his limited access to living practice, his reliance on Brahmin informants and therefore on an elite view, his occasional impatience with what he saw as Indian insularity, and the fact that he never travelled through most of the subcontinent.
- Balance that by noting his **method**, his Sanskrit learning, his comparative use of Greek philosophy, and his explicit separation of educated from popular belief.
- For questions comparing **source traditions**, use one named writer from each as your evidence rather than generalising about nations.

- Close by stating what the sources **cannot** tell us, since acknowledging the limits of the record is what marks a historian rather than a compiler.

Last-mile revision

- ASI 1861 under Cunningham; Marshall and the Harappan discoveries; Wheeler brings stratigraphy in the 1940s; Prinsep deciphers Brahmi and Kharoshthi 1837.
- Jatakas for social evidence; Puranas for dynastic lists; Rajatarangini 1148 as the exception that states a method.
- Greek: Megasthenes and the seven castes error, Periplus about 60 CE, Ptolemy. Chinese: Faxian, Hiuen Tsang's Si-yu-ki, Itsing. Arab: Al-Biruni's Kitab-ul-Hind about 1030.
- Criticism: who, when, for whom, why; corroborate across types; pair hostile with friendly; read archaeology against text.

Common errors to avoid

- Listing sources without criticising them. The unit is about reliability, not about inventory.
- Using Megasthenes on seven castes as fact. It is a Greek misreading of occupational groups.
- Treating the Arthashastra as a Mauryan gazetteer. Its date is contested and it is normative rather than descriptive.
- Praising Al-Biruni without naming his limits, which is exactly what the 2023 question asked for.
- Forgetting that excavation is destructive and unrepeatable, which is the fundamental methodological constraint in archaeology.

Mains Practice

**“Greek writers viewed India largely from a political perspective, Chinese travellers from a religious perspective, and Arab scholars from a scientific and cultural perspective.”
Comment.**

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

Examine the defects in Alberuni's assessment of Indian society.

10 marks · 150 words · 2023