

# Early Indian Notions of History



**Subject: History**

**Unit: Reconstructing Ancient Indian History**

**Lesson: Early Indian Notions of History**

**Lesson Developers : Dr. Naina Dayal**

**College/Department: Assistant Professor, St. Stephen's  
College, University of Delhi**

# Early Indian Notions of History

## Table of contents

- **Chapter 1: Indian history**
  - Early Indian notions of history
  - Exercises
  - Summary
  - Further readings
  - Glossary



# Early Indian Notions of History

## 1.2: Early Indian notions of history

### Did early Indians lack a sense of history?

It is often said that the first truly historical work produced in India was Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (River of Kings). This consists of eight books, each called a *taranga* (wave), and is composed in Sanskrit verse. The *Rajatarangini* contains an account of the rulers of Kashmir, from the earliest ones to those of the 12th century CE, the period of its author. Kalhana was a *brahmana*, the son of a minister, and he drew on a range of sources -- monuments, coins, inscriptions, royal orders, manuscripts and his family members' and his own recollections of recent times -- to write his history of Kashmir. He also attempted to explain past events, but often ended up invoking fate. Nevertheless, the *Rajatarangini*, with its awareness of evidence, interest in causation and sequential narrative, is recognizable as a work of history. However, it is a text of the early 2nd millennium CE.

When 18th/19th century European scholars looked for histories of early India, they found very little that conformed to their idea of what a history should be. They concluded that early India was deficient in history-writing. This lack was linked with Indian notions of time. Indian scales of time were regarded as fantastically large, and Indians were accused of subscribing to the view that time flows in cycles, according to which every period of time invariably returns, every event is repeated, and nothing is unique. And the theory of cyclical time was regarded as a hindrance to the development of a true, linear historical sense. While nationalist histories developed in opposition to imperial frames, scholars like R.C. Majumdar, nevertheless, accepted the idea that history was relatively underdeveloped as a branch of early Indian literature.

#### Value addition: did you know?

#### What James Mill had to say about the 'chronology and ancient history of the Hindus'

James Mill's enormously influential *The History of British India* was first published in 1817. It was used as a text-book at the 'East India College' at Haileybury, close to London, where young men were trained before being posted to India. This is what Mill has to say at the beginning of the first chapter of the first volume of his three-volume *History*:

'Rude nations seem to derive a peculiar gratification from pretensions to a remote antiquity. As a boastful and turgid vanity distinguishes remarkably the oriental nations they have in most instances carried their claims extravagantly high....

The present age of the world, according to the system of the Hindus, is distinguished into four grand periods, denominated **yugas**. The first is the *Satya yuga*, comprehending 1,728,000 years; the second the *Treta yuga*,

## Early Indian Notions of History

comprehending 1,296,000 years; the third the *Dwapar yuga*, including 864,000 years; and the fourth the *Kali yuga*, which will extend to 432,000 years. Of these periods the first three are expired, and in the year 1817 of the Christian era, 4911 of the last. From the commencement, therefore, of the *Satya yuga*, to the present time, is comprehended a space of 3,892,911 years, the antiquity to which this people lay claim.'

Mill roundly condemns such 'Hindu statements' which are 'not only carried to the wildest pitch of extravagance, but are utterly inconsistent', and pronounces that their 'wildness and inconsistency ... place them beyond the sober limits of truth and history'.

**Source: Mill, James. 1990 reprint. *The History of British India*. Vol. 1. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 24, 27.**

It is, however, possible to adopt a different approach. Romila Thapar makes a distinction between 'embedded history' and 'externalized history'. Embedded history is where historical consciousness can only be extracted with effort, as in myth, epic and genealogy. Externalized history, on the other hand, exhibits a more evident historical consciousness, as in chronicles of regions and biographies of figures of authority. If we understand history as a mode of reflecting about the past, we can argue that a sense of history is present in a branch of early Indian literature -- in the *itihasa-purana* tradition. Even texts that invoke divine forces and narratives that are set in cosmological time embed within themselves a commentary on their present, while at the same time giving an account of the past.

### **The *dana-stutis* and other fragmentary narratives in Vedic literature**

Romila Thapar writes that embedded forms of history tend to be scattered. She draws attention to the *dana-stutis* that are found in different parts of the *Rig Veda* (c. 2nd millennium BCE). These are hymns in praise of gifts: bards composed eulogies on their patrons who were often clan chiefs. The occasion for a *stuti* was a successful cattle raid against a neighbouring community in which the chief and his followers captured a large number of cattle. From the wealth he had acquired, the chief gave the bard cattle, horses, gold, chariots and slave girls; and the bard recorded the hero's generosity in a *stuti*, usually naming the donor. However, the *dana-stutis* were not just records of past liberality, they also indicated what was expected from chiefs. Bards claimed that they could bestow immortality on their patrons, and it is true that we know of some *rajas* from the *dana-stutis*.

Extolling the *raja's* deeds was a part of sacrifices like the *ashvamedha*. From later Vedic texts (c. 1st half of the 1st millennium BCE) we gather that a horse was let loose to wander for a year as part of the *yajna*. During that period, *vinagathins* or lute-players - - one a *brahmana*, the other a *kshatriya* -- sang about the *raja's* ritual and heroic accomplishments every day at the place of sacrifice. One can note that only particular

## Early Indian Notions of History

kinds of information were preserved in the *stutis* and the songs of the *vinagathins* -- what was important from the point of view of their bardic or *brahmana* or *kshatriya* composers. The achievements of *rajas* were recorded. Not surprisingly, the composers of such eulogies did not proclaim their patrons' failures. One can also note that it is likely that many of the narratives that were later incorporated in the Sanskrit epics and Puranas developed from such *stutis* and *gathas* (songs), as also from Vedic *akhyanas* (cycles of stories that commemorated heroes).

### The Sanskrit epics: the *Ramayana* of Valmiki and the *Mahabharata* of Vyasa

Traditionally, the events of the Rama story are placed in the Tretayuga, and those of the Mahabharata at the juncture between the Dvapara and Kali *yugas*; and the Kaliyuga is believed to have begun in 3102 BCE. The *Ramayana* informs us that Valmiki saw Rama's story with his mind's eye and turned the vision into the *Ramayana*; he did so when Rama was ruling his kingdom. The *Mahabharata* tells us that Vyasa rose daily for three years and created the *Mahabharata*; he did so after the Kurukshetra war, which ushered in the Kaliyuga. The texts' information about their creation does not tally with the views of modern scholars on the period of composition of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. There is broad agreement among scholars that, while the kernel of the stories contained in the texts may date back to the early centuries of the 1st millennium BCE, as we have them now, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are products of the final centuries BCE and early centuries CE.

#### Value addition: did you know?

#### What does the word 'epic' mean? Why are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* regarded as epics?

Epics recount tales of great heroes who undergo a series of adventures that test their virtue and valour. Their stories encompass features like disputed succession to an ancestral realm, abducted or humiliated wives, journeys through dangerous uncharted lands and bloody wars – their heroes survive all this to emerge victorious. In the form in which we have them, epics *look back* at a heroic age that has passed and glorify values like bravery, honour, fortitude and unswerving obedience to duty. Their heroes tend to have a special relationship with the gods – an epic hero could be a part or an incarnation of a god, for instance. So, these texts bring together the human and divine realms, often in the person of the hero.

As a genre, the epic is not only narrative and heroic, it also tends to be oral in origin. And since such texts have generally been transmitted orally, their stories have been told in a particular way. Each narrator has recounted the tale in his own manner – dwelling, for instance, on a part that he likes or considers important, elucidating right and wrong, and so on. In the process, epics have changed and grown. They begin with a core text that describes historical happenings. Fresh material keeps on being introduced around this – later events,

## Early Indian Notions of History

new values and didactic matter are added on and, during the evolution of an epic, the scale of the core incident is also hugely inflated. Since all manner of material is added to such texts repeatedly over a long period of time, we cannot speak of a narrowly defined 'epic age'.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* display the features of epics. They are narrative and heroic, and it is believed that the political situation they reflect predates the period of their composition, that they *look back* at a past age. They are generally held to be oral in origin. And scholars like J.L. Brockington have argued that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, like other epics, were composed over a long period of time.

**Source: Original**

Traditionally, the *Ramayana* is regarded as a *kavya* -- a poem about idealized characters, the *Mahabharata* is not. The latter is classified as *itihasa*, literally, 'thus (*iti*) indeed (*ha*) it was (*asa*)'. However, we cannot say with certainty whether or not all the events described in either epic are factually correct. Rather, modern scholars argue that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* reflect historical processes of change. For instance, Romila Thapar draws attention to the difference in the system of governance in the chronologically early and late portions of the *Mahabharata*. She writes that while much of the early layer indicates a period a little before the emergence of the monarchical state, the later sections assume the existence of well-established monarchies, and the text suggests the transition from 'lineage to state'. Given that both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are concerned with enduring problems for rulers, such as determining the heir to the throne, it is not surprising that the two texts contain genealogies. The *Mahabharata* contains the genealogy of the lunar line (*chandravamsha*), and the *Ramayana* contains the genealogy of the solar line (*suryavamsha*). While these genealogies may not be literally true, they do reflect an attempt to capture and order the past or, to put it another way, a historical consciousness.

### Value addition: what the sources say

#### The Bhrigus and the *Mahabharata*

Apart from genealogies of rulers, the Sanskrit epics contain genealogies of sages. Here is one of the genealogies of the Bhrigus, an unconventional line of *brahmanas*, who are an important presence in the *Mahabharata*:

'The blessed Lord Bhrigu issued forth by breaking open Brahma's heart. Bhrigu begot the wise Shukra....A master of Yoga, he became the sagacious guru of the Daityas as well as the Gods, remaining a celibate of wisdom and strict vows. And while this son of Bhrigu was thus charged by the omnipresent One with the well-being of the creatures, Bhrigu begot another flawless son, Chyavana, of the blazing austerities....Manu's daughter Arushi became the wise Chyavana's wife, and from her was born the greatly famous Aurva....His son was Richika, who begot Jamadagni. Jamadagni begot four great-spirited sons, the last being Rama, not the least endowed with virtues, skilled in all weapons and missiles, willful destroyer of the barons [*kshatriyas*].'

## Early Indian Notions of History

In the *Mahabharata*, the Bhrigus act in ways that do not conform to the norms of conduct for *brahmanas* set forth in the literature on *dharma*, including the *Mahabharata* itself. They are associated with violence -- they are sometimes hostile to *kshatriyas*, and sometimes even to the gods. Rama (Parashu Rama), for instance, is said to have destroyed the *kshatriyas* of the earth over and over again. One can ask why genealogies of sages are found in a text about a feud in a *kshatriya* family. Perhaps such genealogies were important because they preserved information about the legitimate transmission of knowledge. And the Bhrigu *brahmanas* are associated with the codification and transmission of the *Mahabharata* within the text.

**Source: van Buitenen, J. A. B. trans. 1973. *The Mahabharata: The Book of the Beginning*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 149-50.**

### The Puranas

The Puranas, as we know them, are likely to have been composed from about the 4th-5th centuries CE. The word *purana* refers to that which belongs to the past, and the texts known as the Puranas suggest how the past was seen in the mid-1st millennium CE. The Puranas contain narratives of beginnings. We are told, for instance, that the earth was ruled by the Manus, of whom the first -- Manu Svayambhu -- was born of the god Brahma. A great flood occurred at the time of a later Manu. Everything was submerged, but Manu, his family and seven sages survived. Manu's children became the ancestors to many lineages. In some versions of the story, Manu's eldest son -- Ikshvaku -- is said to be the ancestor of the *suryavamsha*, and the youngest child -- Ila - - the progenitor of the *chandravamsha*. We gather that rulers of the solar and lunar lineages ruled till the Mahabharata war. That event is a time-marker: after an account of the war, the narrative goes on to chronicle the dynasties of the Kaliyuga, the present corrupt age. Not surprisingly, the kings of the post-war period are depicted as inferior to the *suryavamshi* and *chandravamshi* descendants of Manu's progeny. They are often not of *kshatriya* stock, as rulers of the past were. It is evident that people of mixed caste, those regarded as outcastes, *shudras*, foreigners and others of impure origin, as well as upstarts could wield power in the Kaliyuga. The listing of dynasties and their kings brings the account up to about the mid-1st millennium CE.

#### Value addition: interesting details

##### Genealogies in the future tense

Statements about what happened after the Mahabharata war are made in the future tense in Puranic genealogies. So, the narrator says: 'I will now enumerate the kings who will reign in future periods....' It is evident that the past lay in events that took place before the war. The dynasties of the post-war period include the Shishunaga, Nanda, Maurya, Shunga, Kanva and Andhra. The Guptas are mentioned towards the end of the genealogical lists, and we are told that they will rule over the territories of Prayaga, Saketa and Magadha. Does this indicate that the genealogies were put together in the Gupta period? Was the future tense used so as to suggest that these rulers were destined to rule? To assert their right to rule?

**Source: Original**

## Early Indian Notions of History

There is much in the Puranic genealogies that can be dismissed as fiction. However, it is important to note that many of the rulers mentioned in these genealogies are also known from other sources -- from inscriptions and coins, for instance. It seems that traditions of recording the names of rulers as well as the duration of their reigns existed in early India. The Puranic genealogies were one form in which such information was preserved. One may also note that genealogies become significant at times that witness attempts to either contest or consolidate power. Invoking genealogies at such times can be seen as a way of claiming an exalted status, and this would have been especially important when such claims were tenuous. And scholars like Romila Thapar have drawn attention to the fact that rulers of the post-Gupta period, many of them former underdogs, started latching on to *kshatriya* genealogies to legitimize their power.

### Prashastis and charitas

The Sanskrit epics and Puranas were composed in fairly simple Sanskrit verse. Although Sanskrit learning was largely the preserve of the upper castes, and of *brahmana* men in particular, these texts suggest that their contents may have been recounted before audiences that included women and the lower castes. In other words, all sections of society might have had access to the genealogies contained in the epics and Puranas. But there were other texts that were probably meant for a more exclusive, elite audience. These were usually written in ornate Sanskrit, and were associated with the royal court. This category of texts includes ***prashastis*** (eulogistic inscriptions) and ***charitas*** (accounts of the lives of great men).

While some of the earliest *prashastis* are in Prakrit, the best known are in Sanskrit. Such inscriptions became common from around the 4th century CE. Perhaps the most famous *prashasti* is Samudragupta's 4th century CE Allahabad pillar inscription, which is inscribed on an Ashokan pillar. It was composed by Samudragupta's court poet and minister, Harishena, in Sanskrit prose and verse, and eulogizes the Gupta king's military achievements, cultural accomplishments and personality. It describes his victories over the rulers of north India, and his expeditions to south India. It mentions rulers elsewhere who acknowledged his supremacy. Samudragupta is depicted as an able and compassionate king, his scholarship is praised, as are his musical performances and poetry. While it is likely that some of the descriptions of Samudragupta's exploits are true, it is important to remember that the text was composed by the king's court poet as a panegyric.

Banabhatta's *Harshacharita* is the oldest surviving royal biography in India, and one of the best known. This 7th century CE text in complex Sanskrit prose presents a glowing picture of Banabhatta's patron -- Harshavardhana. It contains an account of the ruler's ancestry and his early life, and culminates with his accession to the thrones of Thanesar and Kanauj. Not surprisingly, *prashastis* and *charitas* depict their authors' patrons as



## Early Indian Notions of History

ideal monarchs. This apart, it has been suggested that both kinds of eulogistic compositions may have been especially useful in situations where rulers were somewhat vulnerable. The Allahabad *prashasti* hints at a conflict regarding Samudragupta's claims to the Gupta throne, and Harsha became king after the sudden death of his elder brother and also claimed the kingdom of his deceased brother-in-law. These two rulers may not have been the obvious choice for rulership. And one can ask whether *prashastis* and *charitas* can be understood as means of legitimizing kings whose right to the throne could have been questioned.

### Value addition: what the sources say

#### The *Harshacharita* and Banabhatta

Given below is a long, complex, eulogistic sentence from the *Harshacharita*, which is typical of the genre of *charita*:

'He [Harsha] was embraced by the goddess of Royal Prosperity, who took him in her arms, and, seizing him by all the royal marks on all his limbs, forced him, however reluctant, to mount the throne -- and this though he had taken a vow of austerity and did not swerve from his vow, hard like grasping the edge of a sword; clinging closely to duty through fear of stumbling in the uneven path of kings, and attended with all her heart by Truth who had been abandoned by all other kings, but had obtained his promise of protection, and waited on reverentially by the reflected images of a fair handmaid standing near, which fell on his toe-nails, as if they were the ten directions of space impersonate.'

In his biography of Harsha, Banabhatta also tells his audience about himself. Interestingly, he describes himself as a Bhrigu *brahmana*. As has been mentioned above, the Bhrigus are associated with the *Mahabharata*. In this way, among others, Banabhatta links himself and his text with the *itihasa* tradition.

**Source: Singh, Upinder. 2008. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. New Delhi: Pearson Education, 31; Pathak, V. S. 1966. *Ancient Historians of India: A Study in Historical Biographies*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 32-39.**

## Parallel traditions of historical writing and dating systems

There were traditions of historical writing other than those that were related to rulers. One tradition was that of the Buddhist monastic chronicle. While focusing on the *sangha* or monastic order, it included more general information about the history of the period. Maintaining such records probably became more important as monasteries became wealthy institutions, attracting patronage from the rich and the powerful. One may mention as examples the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, or the Sri Lankan chronicles, both composed in Pali in the mid-1st millennium CE, but narrating events from earlier periods. The *Dipavamsa* focuses on the coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and the establishment of the *sangha*. The *Mahavamsa* covers the same themes but also highlights the history of the Mahavihara monastery, to which the author belonged. The

# Early Indian Notions of History

history of the *sangha* was integrated with the political history of Sri Lanka, and even with the rule of the Mauryas in India, for Ashoka is said to have sent his son Mahinda to spread the message of Buddhism to the island. The Buddhists not only maintained records of this sort, they also developed a system of chronology, where major events were dated in terms of the number of years from the death of the Buddha.

There were other systems of dating as well. One involved the use of regnal years. This was a system in which kings took the first year of their reign as the starting point, counting the years of their rule from that beginning. This system was used by the Mauryan ruler Ashoka, who used dates derived from the time of his consecration. So, for instance, his 13th Major Rock Edict tells us that he conquered Kalinga when he had been consecrated eight years. Many different eras were also used in early India. Examples include the Vikrama era of 58 BCE, the Shaka era of 78 CE and the Gupta era of 319-20 CE. It is clear that cyclical time was not the only concept of time known to people in early India. Linear time, too, was used extensively -- in genealogies, biographies and chronicles, for instance. It is also clear that different categories of early Indian texts exhibit a sense of history. We cannot always be sure of the historicity of their contents, but we can be sensitive to the ways in which they demonstrate a historical consciousness. We must remember, however, that these texts suggest how elites reflected on the past, how they recorded and ordered it.

## 1.2: Exercises

### Essay questions

- 1) What do you understand by the term 'history'? Do you think early Indians lacked a sense of history?
- 2) What does the word 'epic' mean? Why are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* classified as epics? How do they demonstrate a historical consciousness?

### 1.2 Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	True or False	1

#### Question

The *Rig Veda* contains *dana-stutis*.

Correct Answer / Option(s)	True
----------------------------	------

## Early Indian Notions of History

### **Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer**

The *dana-stutis* of the *Rig Veda* (c. 2nd millennium BCE) are hymns in praise of gifts. Bards composed eulogies on their patrons who were often clan chiefs. A *dana-stuti* mentions the gifts received by its composer, and usually the name of his benefactor. And historians know of some *rajās* from the *dana-stutis*. Some scholars regard these records as the 'earliest histories' of ancient India.

### **Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer**

Reviewer's Comment:

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	Match the following	2

### **Question**

Match the following:

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| a) Gupta era        | i) dynasties of the Kaliyuga           |
| b) Nanda and Kanva  | ii) account of the life of a great man |
| c) <i>charita</i>   | iii) 319-320 CE                        |
| d) <i>Dipavamsa</i> | iv) Sri Lanka                          |

**Correct Answer / Option(s)**

a) and iii), b) and i), c) and ii), d) and iv)

### **Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer**

a) Perhaps the best known dynastic era is the Gupta era of 319-320 CE. This was projected as beginning from the year of accession of the first important Gupta king, Chandragupta I. Interestingly, the use of the era began with retrospective effect, from the time of Chandragupta II, around 80 years after it was supposed to begin. It was only after they had consolidated their power that Gupta rulers started an era, pushing back their claims to power as far back as possible.

b) The Nanda and Kanva dynasties appear in Puranic genealogies. They are

## Early Indian Notions of History

presented as dynasties of the period after the Mahabharata war, which is said to have ushered in the Kaliyuga, the present dark age. These were historical dynasties, and such information in Puranic genealogies indicates that these records cannot be dismissed as pure fiction, even if they seem rather fanciful at times.

c) *Charitas* were meant to be accounts of the lives of great men. Most of the *charitas* that survive are in Sanskrit, and the style of these compositions is very ornate. It seems likely that they were composed for elite consumption. One of the earliest *charitas* we have access to is the *Buddhacharita* of Ashvaghosha (c. 1st century CE). This is a biography of the Buddha. Banabhatta's *Harshacharita* is the oldest surviving biography of an Indian king, and one of the best known.

d) The *Dipavamsa* (c. 4th-5th centuries CE) is the earliest Pali chronicle available from Sri Lanka. It focuses on the coming of Buddhism to the island and the establishment of the *sangha* or monastic order. The existence of a text like the *Dipavamsa* suggests that traditions of historical writing in early South Asia were not associated only with the royal court.

### Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Reviewer's Comment:

## Summary 1.2

- When 18th/19th century European scholars looked for histories of early India, they found very little that conformed to their idea of what a history should be. They concluded that early India was deficient in history-writing. While nationalist histories developed in opposition to imperial frames, scholars like R. C. Majumdar, nevertheless, accepted the idea that history was relatively underdeveloped as a branch of early Indian literature.
- However, if we understand history as a mode of reflecting about the past, we can argue that a sense of history is present in a branch of early Indian literature -- in the *itihasa-purana* tradition.
- The *dana-stutis* of the *Rig Veda*, the Sanskrit epics, the Puranas, *prashastis*, *charitas* and chronicles of religious institutions, among other sources, exhibit a sense of history, even though this sometimes has to be prised out.

# Early Indian Notions of History

## Further readings 1.2

Brockington, J. L. 1998. *The Sanskrit Epics*. Leiden: Brill.

Pargiter, F. E. 1962. *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Pathak, V. S. 1966. *Ancient Historians of India: A Study in Historical Biographies*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Thapar, Romila. 1996. *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Thapar, Romila. 2000. *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Thapar, Romila. 2002. *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Trautmann, T. R. 2009. Indian Time, European Time, in *The Clash of Chronologies: Ancient India in the Modern World*, 25-52. Delhi: Yoda Press.

## Glossary 1.2

**akhyana:** cycle of stories commemorating heroes recited at the time of a *yajna*

**charita:** account of the life of a great man

**dana-stuti:** hymn in praise of gifts

**itihasa:** literally, 'thus indeed it was'

**prashasti:** panegyric, eulogistic inscription

**purana:** literally, 'old'. The word is found in Vedic literature, where it denotes an ancient narrative. However, we cannot be sure of its nature. Note that the term *purana* is a singular noun, and must be seen as distinct from the many texts we know as the Puranas.

**raja:** chief or king

**vinagathin:** lute-player who sang about a *raja's* ritual or heroic accomplishments at the *ashvamedha*

**yuga:** an age, one of four periods of time. A *mahayuga* or 'grand *yuga*' consists of four *yugas* in succession: Satya or Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kali. Each successive *yuga* is shorter, and is marked by a decline in *dharma*. At the end of one *mahayuga*, the cycle of *yugas* begins again