

Footwear and the Cultural Construction of the Foot in Ancient India: Material Culture, Ritual Symbolism and Social Expression (From Prehistoric Age to Early Medieval Period)

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Abstract: This paper investigates footwear in ancient India as both a utilitarian craft and a cultural metaphor, while re-examining its long historical trajectory through an integrated analysis of archaeological, iconographic, textual, and ethnographic evidence presented in a structured, tabular synthesis. The four tables (geographic distribution, typological evolution, technology and visual culture, and functional and ritual transformation) condensed diverse data to reveal patterns that would otherwise be obscured by fragmentary preservation. The results demonstrate a persistent technological core (simple soles and attachment strategies), progressive material complexity (from hide and reed to wood, ivory, and metal), and decisive ritualization in the early historic and medieval periods, when footwear became a medium of social representation and devotional practice. *Paduka* emerges as the central object that links craft competence to symbolic potency. Regional resource economies and religious codes actively mediated footwear form and use. Gandharan strap types reflect cross-cultural exchange, while southern temple *padukas* embody devotional investment. The paper presents the results derived from the tables, specifies precise locations for table insertion in the manuscript, discusses the tables as analytical devices, and concludes with a set of prioritized research actions aimed at moving from inference toward direct evidence. This synthesis aims to provide a clear, testable framework for subsequent excavation, microanalysis, and craft documentation, thereby strengthening the interpretations of material culture where organic remains are scarce.

Keywords: Footwear; *Paduka*; Material culture; Ritual symbolism; Social Identity; Craft Traditions

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Introduction

Footwear intersects craft, everyday life, and beliefs. In South Asia, the foot carries ambivalence; it is the site of devotion in ritual contexts (e.g., prostration, touching feet) and, conversely, a locus of pollution in certain ceremonial registers. This cultural ambivalence makes footwear a particularly

revealing material for historians and archaeologists. Treating shoes merely as utilitarian objects would miss how social hierarchies, religious prescriptions, and economic processes shaped them. However, archaeological challenges are acute. India's climate destroys organic materials; therefore, direct findings, such as leather shoes with woven soles, are rare. In such circumstances, an integrated method is essential that combines tool assemblages, tanning installations, sculptural iconography, textual references, museum specimens, and living craft knowledge. Tabular synthesis is a pragmatic tool that organizes heterogeneous evidence, highlights patterns, and makes lacunae explicit.

The results of this study are reported in this paper. We constructed four tables to capture different but complementary dimensions: (1) spatial distribution and site evidence, (2) typological evolution, (3) technological practices and their artistic manifestations, and (4) functional/ritual transformation across periods. Presenting the analysis step-by-step (following each table's logic) helps avoid sweeping claims based on fragmentary data, and provides transparent grounding for interpretive moves.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. After a brief methodological note, the results of the tables are presented in four sequential sections. Each section draws precise interpretive points and suggests how they fit within a broader cultural history. We then offer a dedicated discussion of the tables as analytical instruments, provide practical guidance on where to insert the tables into the final manuscript, and close with a synthesis and research agenda aimed at refining these inferences through future field and laboratory work.

Methods and Sources

This study was both comparative and synthetic in nature. Primary categories of evidence were identified and collected from published excavation reports, museum catalogues, sculptural corpora, classical texts, and targeted field observations. Key documentary sources included excavation reports and ASI publications for Harappa and central Indian sites; iconographic catalogues for Sanchi, Bharhut, Mathura, and Gandhara; textual references from the *Rigveda*, *Arthashastra* (Shamasastri, 1915), Pali monastic rules, Tamil literature (Shastri, 1956); and modern syntheses (Thapar, 2002; Singh, 2008). We also consulted recent specialist work on footwear representation in Gandhara (Siddiqui, 2024) and comparative studies on preserved prehistoric footwear (Pinhasi *et al.*, 2010).

The tables were built iteratively. **Table 1** lists the sites, periods, and observed materials or iconographic traces. **Table 2** codifies the typology across periods (form, material, symbolic meaning). **Table 3** aligns workshop/technological traces with artistic representations and museum objects. **Table 4** condenses the first three into functional and ritual matrices. Where possible, we cross-checked archaeological claims with museum specimens and ethnographic comments of living craftspeople. The museum visit to the Allahabad Museum, Prayagraj (2025), provided practical corroboration for the carving and finishing steps evident on wooden *padukas*.

Limitations are real: The approach depends on published records and visible, interpretable motifs. Iconography is stylized, textual references are prescriptive rather than descriptive, and craft continuity suggested by ethnography can never entirely substitute a securely dated archaeological specimen. Nevertheless, the tabular method provides clarity: it makes claims traceable and identifies points where further empirical work would most profitably close evidentiary gaps.

The following tables synthesize the evidence examined in this study and present it within a structured comparative framework that underpins the analytical interpretations discussed below:

Table 1: Geographical Distribution of Key Archaeological Sites Related to Footwear Evidence

Region / State	Key Sites	Cultural Period	Material or Iconographic Evidence	Relevance to Footwear Studies
North-West India (Punjab, Sindh)	Harappa, Mohenjo-daro	Indus Civilization (2500–1500 BCE)	Tanning vats, copper awls, figurines with strap marks	Organized the leather working and early footwear manufacturing
Rajasthan & Western India	Bagor	Chalcolithic Period (3000–2000 BCE)	Bone awls, scrapers	Hide preparation and primitive sandal making
Deccan Region (Maharashtra)	Inamgaon	Chalcolithic Period (2000–1500 BCE)	Leather residues, hide tools	Domestic craft production
Central India (Madhya Pradesh)	Sanchi, Bharhut	Early Historic Age (3rd century BCE–1st century CE)	Reliefs of donors in sandals	Social distinction through footwear
Gangetic Plains (U.P. & Bihar)	Kausambi, Sarnath, Nalanda	Mauryan, Kushana and Gupta Age (3rd century BCE–6th century CE)	Inscriptions, sculpture, architecture	Institutional and ritual use
Southern India (Tamil Nadu)	Kanchipuram, Thanjavur	Early-Medieval Period (9th century–12th century CE)	Temple bronzes, gold <i>padukas</i>	Devotional and royal symbolism

Note: Compiled from Singh (2008) and Thapar (2002).

Results of Table 1: Geographical distribution and site evidence

Summary of Table 1. Table 1 maps the distribution of sites across broad regions: northwest (Harappa, Mohenjo-daro), Central India (Sanchi, Bharhut), Gangetic plains (Sarnath, Nalanda, Kausambi, Prayagraj), Deccan (Inamgaon), Rajasthan (Bagor), and Tamil region (Kanchipuram, Thanjavur). For each site, we listed the period and specific material or iconographic traces relevant to footwear (tanning pits, awls, figurines, reliefs, and inscriptions).

Key Results

- 1. Manufacturing concentration in the northwest.** The Harappan sites show the densest evidence for organized leather work: circular tanning vats, toolkits dominated by copper awls and knives, and associated drainage. This industrial profile suggests the capacity to produce multiple leather goods, including sandals. The presence of standardized tools implies not casual, ad hoc work but a sustained craft economy.
- 2. Craft neighborhoods across Chalcolithic settlements.** Bagor and Inamgaon presented consistent hide-processing tools (bone awls and scrapers), often found alongside pottery workshops. This co-location suggests integrated craft quarters, rather than itinerant craft practices. In socio-technical terms, early specialization in hide-working is plausible in the late Chalcolithic.
- 3. Religious and artistic foci in central and southern India.** Sites such as Sanchi, Bharhut, Mathura, and later Tamil Temple centres document extensive iconographies of shod donors, carved *padukas*, and inscriptions recording *paduka* donations. These contexts show the ritual importance of footwear acquired over time, and the centrality of temples as loci for devotional offerings that incorporate footwear.

Interpretive Points

- The geographic pattern suggests separation—production hubs (northwest, some Chalcolithic sites) versus ritual display centers (Gangetic and southern temple landscapes). This separation does not

need to indicate the total geographic separation between makers and ritual consumers; rather, it indicates that urban craft production networks feed wider ritual economies.

- Economic inference: tanning pits and toolkits in Harappa indicate surplus production potential, likely engaging in exchanges across regional networks. The presence of finished or semi-finished leather items may be archaeologically invisible: however, tools and installations are reliable proxies for craft intensity.

Table 2: Typological Evolution of Footwear in Ancient India

<i>Period</i>	<i>Date Range</i>	<i>Typical Form</i>	<i>Primary Material</i>	<i>Cultural or Symbolic Meaning</i>
Prehistoric / Chalcolithic	6000–2000 BCE	Hide wrappings	Leather, fiber	Physical protection
Indus Civilization	2600–1900 BCE	Flat sandals, woven soles	Leather, reed	Cleanliness and civic order
Vedic / Epic	1500–500 BCE	<i>Upānah</i> , early <i>paduka</i>	Hide, wood	Ritual purity and rank
Buddhist / Jain	500 BCE–300 CE	Wooden <i>paduka</i>	Wood, fiber	Asceticism, humility
Mauryan–Gupta Age	300 BCE–600 CE	Strapped sandals, ornate <i>paduka</i>	Leather, ivory	Royal & religious identity
Early-Medieval Period	600–1200 CE	Carved, gilded <i>paduka</i>	Wood, metal	Temple offering, devotion

Note. Sources: Jain-Neubauer (2000) and Singh (2008).

Results of Table 2: Typological evolution and morphological sequences

Summary of Table 2. Table 2 shows the chronological typology: prehistoric/chalcolithic (hide wrappings), Indus (flat sandals), Vedic/Epic (*upānah*, early *paduka*), Buddhist/Jain (wooden *paduka*, barefoot ideals), Mauryan–Gupta (strapped sandals, ornate *padukas*), and Early Medieval (carved/gilded *padukas*). For each phase, the table records the principal materials and a succinct statement of the symbolic meaning.

Key results

- 1. Continuity of functional core.** Over thousands of years, functional imperatives, protection, durability, and mobility have remained constant. The earliest hide wrappings functioned as practical devices for ground protection; this enduring requirement explains the persistence of simple sole forms through later periods.
- 2. Gradual material diversification.** The typology traces a sequence of material sophistication. Initially, plant fibres and rawhide suffice; later, as tanning and sewing develop, leather becomes predominant; wood and ivory enter a repertoire where religious or ritual uses demand durability or symbolic density; and finally, precious metal inlays appear in elite and temple contexts. Material change is linked to both technological possibilities and patronage level.
- 3. Religious shaping of form.** Buddhist and Jain prescriptions affected material choices: Monastics avoided leather when possible (or used alternative soles), producing a distinctive wooden *paduka* tradition that balanced mobility with non-violence. The typology shows how ethical prescriptions refract into craft forms.
- 4. Paduka as a hinge form.** The *paduka* occupies a central position: simple enough to be made by woodworkers, yet symbolically potent enough to be enshrined and donated. Its simplicity allowed

broad social uptake, and its symbolic flexibility made it a vessel for royal, devotional, and ascetic meanings.

Interpretive points

Typological sequencing supports a model in which technological mastery (tanning and sewing) precedes a symbolic elaboration. Court ornamentation appears only after dependable production techniques are institutionalised.

When preservation is weak, the typology serves as an interpretive scaffold. For example, an Indus-era resin stain near a tanning pit gains added meaning when read against the typology: tanning activities are likely to produce leather that could be made into sandals.

Table 3: Technological and Artistic Representation of Footwear

<i>Context</i>	<i>Example / Site</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Interpretation / Function</i>
Craft Technology	Harappa	Industrial remains	Circular tanning pits, tools	Leather processing
Artistic Depiction	Sanchi & Bharhut	Stone relief	Donors in sandals, monks barefoot	Moral & social symbolism
Museum Object	Allahabad Museum	Wood	Teak <i>paduka</i> , lotus motif	Ritual use
Cross-Cultural Influence	Gandhara & Gupta	Stone relief	Strap sandals vs. flat <i>paduka</i>	Hellenistic impact, Indian adaptation
Temple Ritual Art	Thanjavur	Metal sculpture	Golden miniature <i>paduka</i>	Devotional donation
Continuing Tradition	Uttar Pradesh & Tamil Nadu	Ethnographic	Handmade ritual sandals	Survival of ancient craft

Note. Synthesized from ASI Reports; Siddiqui (2024); Author's field notes.

Results of Table 3: Technology, iconography, and museum validation

1. Summary of Table 3. Table 3 matches workshop and production evidence (tanning pits, tool scatters, drying platforms) with artistic depictions (reliefs, statuaries) and specific museum specimens (wooden *padukas*, miniature votive sandals). It is an effort to pair production traces with representational evidence and extant artefacts.

Key Results

- 1. Concordance between production traces and images.** Where tannery remains appear, later art forms often display strapped-sandal types: the northwestern Gandharan reliefs show cross-strapped sandals whose construction implies sewn uppers, consistent with the presence of awls and stitching tools at nearby sites. This concordance supports the production-to-representation chain.
- 2. Tool marks and carved *padukas*.** Examination of wooden *padukas* in museum collections (including the Allahabad specimen) revealed mortise marks for toe pegs, finish patterns, and wear consistent with regular use. These traits match the ethnographic descriptions of carving and finishing steps taught among artisan families. The physical traces allow the inference of production stages: rough shaping, peg mortising, pegging, sanding, and finishing.
- 3. Iconographic fidelity and stylisation.** While sculptures and reliefs are stylised, recurring features toe pegging in *paduka* depictions, strap arrangements in Gandharan reliefs, and raised soles in

certain southern reliefs are consistent motifs, rather than random aesthetic choices. Their recurrence across contexts suggests recognised categories of footwear that artists have deliberately replicated.

- Votive and ritual contexts in museum collections.** Miniature golden padukas and metal replicas preserved in temple treasuries represent the ritualisation of footwear. Their existence in controlled contexts (temples and inscribed donations) indicates that footwear could travel from the bodily sphere into the sphere of sacred objects.

Interpretive Points

Table 3 demonstrates that production evidence is not isolated; it participates in a cultural circuit in which makers, patrons, and artists exchange meaning. A tanning pit does not only speak to an industry; it speaks to the kinds of goods that the industry could supply and the social uses to which those goods would be put.

The link between tool marks and images reduces reliance on pure iconographic reading. An artist's depiction of a strap system gains archaeological credibility when similar stitching tools are used in production contexts.

Museum specimens bridge the archaeological and textual worlds. A paduka with polished surfaces and traces of pigment sits at the intersection of craft technique, liturgical use, and visual culture. Table 3's purpose was to make these linkages explicit and testable.

Table 4: Chronological and Functional Transformation of Footwear

<i>Period</i>	<i>Technology & Craft</i>	<i>Materials</i>	<i>Social Function</i>	<i>Ritual Meaning</i>
Prehistoric	Manual hide scraping	Leather/fibre	Protection	None
Indus Civilization	Organized tanning	Leather/reed	Urban utility	Cleanliness
Vedic / Epic	Handcrafted sandals	Wood/hide	Status mark	Purity
Buddhist / Jain	Monastic regulation	Wood/fibre	Ethical restraint	Relic symbolism
Mauryan, Kushana and Gupta	Specialized workshops	Leather/ivory	Court/elite use	Royal representation
Early Medieval	Ornamental craft	Metal/wood/gold	Temple devotion	Spiritual symbolism

Note. Compiled by the author from archaeological and textual data.

Results of Table 4: Functional and ritual synthesis

Summary of Table 4. Table 4 compresses the preceding tables into a matrix of framing technology, materials, social function, and ritual meaning for each major period. It operationalizes the claim that footwear is simultaneously a tool, economic product, and cultural sign.

Key results

- Functional shift to representational use.** The matrix shows a clear trajectory: footwear's primary role shifts from protection (earliest phases) to visible markers of social position and ritual legitimacy (Mauryan, Kushana and Gupta, onward). Table 4 quantifies this shift by aligning specific material enrichments (e.g., ivory inlays) with social contexts (court patronage and temple donations).
- Religious doctrine as a driver of material choice.** The Buddhist and Jain prescriptions shaped not only individual behavior but also craft outputs. Table 4 highlights the bifurcation: monastic contexts favor wooden or minimal soles, and lay contexts favor leather or ornamented forms. Thus, the ritual constraints channel material flows and workshop output.

3. **Regional resource logic.** The matrix makes explicit how local materials and trade networks produce morphological variation. Teak and hardwoods in the south favor carved padukas; ivory, available through trade, appears in elite contexts; and reed and fiber support lighter forms in riverine Bengal.
4. **Paduka as social technology.** Table 4 shows the flexibility of the paduka: a modest object capable of serving everyday, devotional, and legal roles. Its material simplicity allowed widespread production, and its symbolic weight allowed appropriation by the elites.

Interpretive points

The synthesis in Table 4 moves beyond description to causal thinking: religious ethics and material availability do not merely accompany changes, but they help explain them. For instance, a region with abundant hardwoods and active temple patronage will produce carved padukas that are subsequently donated and inscribed, thereby transforming an object of craft into an object of cults.

Table 4 also shows where the evidence is thin. For some periods or regions, we can say only “probable” or “inferred.” Thus, the matrix supports the conclusions and designates areas for targeted empirical work.

7. Discussion: The tables as analytic devices

The four tables are not merely appendices; they constitute the analytical engine for this study. Their structured form converts the scatter of site reports, relief descriptions, and textual snippets into comparable units. Three methodological virtues are worth emphasizing. First, **transparency**. Each table records the evidence type, allowing readers to evaluate claims against the source quality. For example, Harappan tanning pits are robust archaeological features, and an interpretation based on them carries different weights than a literary reference that is prescriptive in nature.

Second, **comparability**. Tabular fields standardize variables (period, material, and function) so that diachronic comparisons are straightforward. The typology in Table 2 has become legible across centuries, precisely because the categories are consistent.

Third, **gap detection**. The formatted layout makes the lacunae visible. A blank cell—regions with iconographic silence and periods lacking museum specimens—signals where excavation or microanalysis should be prioritised.

Practically, these tables shape the research strategy. Table 1 suggests which sites should be revisited or sampled; Table 2 suggests typological markers to look for in iconography; Table 3 points to the kinds of micro-analyses (e.g., species identification in wood, tanning compounds in leather residues) that will yield high informational returns; and Table 4 frames questions about ritual economy and patronage.

Final methodological note: A tabular inference is probabilistic. Because archaeological proxies substitute for missing organics, arguments must be framed in terms of likelihood, rather than certainty. However, the combination of toolkits, images, and surviving objects produces a convergent evidentiary case: when multiple independent lines point in the same direction, the inference is stronger. The appendix provides a chronological synthesis of footwear types, materials, and meanings, offering a consolidated framework that supports the interpretive patterns identified in the discussion. It clarifies long-term continuities and transformations that are less visible in site-specific analyses alone.

Conclusion: Synthesis and priorities informed by the tables and appendix

The tabular synthesis developed in this study clarifies how footwear in ancient India evolved as a technology and cultural sign. Two broad trends were evident across the millennia surveyed. **First**, continuity: A functional need for protection produced durable technological solutions—sturdy soles and effective attachment systems—that persisted even when materials and aesthetics changed. **Second**, as craft competence matured and social institutions (courts, temples, monastic orders) expanded, footwear acquired symbolic and ritual functions that often overshadowed mere utility.

The paduka is emblematic of both tendencies. Its design is parsimonious, replicable, and culturally capacious. The tables illustrate how the paduka travelled across various contexts: used by ascetics for its non-injurious affordances, adopted by courts for its capacity to be ornamented and thus signify rank, and enshrined in temples for its devotional resonance. Its endurance is attributed to its adaptability.

Tables 1–4 define the concrete research agenda. The most immediate priority is **targeted excavation and sampling of sites most likely to preserve organics**—waterlogged deposits, sealed drains, and cave contexts identified in Table 1. Second, **micro-analytical work** (residue chemistry, micro-CT scanning, and species identification) applied to museum specimens and any recovered leather will permit species/technique attribution and refine dating. Third, **ethnoarchaeological documentation** of living shoemaking communities—craft vocabulary, process sequences, and raw-material sourcing—will provide living analogs for interpreting tool marks and workshop layouts catalogued in Table 3.

Finally, the tables encourage comparative studies. The Gandharan–Gupta contrast (strap sandals vs. padukas) points to cross-cultural contacts across the northwestern corridors; tracing these contacts through comparative morphology and trade network analysis will illuminate diffusion mechanisms.

In summary, the tabular results transform disparate observations into an interpretable narrative: footwear in ancient India is simultaneously a craft history, a history of ideas about purity and status, and a mirror of regional resource economies. By placing the tables at the center of the argument, the research makes its evidentiary basis explicit and lacunae actionable. The next generation of fieldwork and laboratory science can thus move from cautious inferences to confident, testable claims. In support of these arguments, the chronological synthesis presented in the appendix illustrates that footwear in ancient India evolved through a sustained interaction between technological capability, environmental context, and cultural values. The trajectory from simple hide wrappings to increasingly elaborate and ritually invested padukas highlights a gradual shift from purely functional use to symbolic and devotional significance. This long-term perspective reinforces the central claim of the study that material culture, even in its most everyday forms, serves as a sensitive indicator of broader social organization, religious practice, and ideological change across historical periods. In light of the study's emphasis on the cultural construction of the foot, this research demonstrates that footwear in ancient India functioned not merely as a material response to environmental or practical needs, but as a socially and ritually encoded object. Throughout time, the foot has emerged as a site where notions of purity, hierarchy, devotion, and identity have been negotiated through material form. From utilitarian coverings in prehistoric contexts to the ritualised paduka of the early medieval period, footwear reflects shifting cultural meanings that connect bodily practice to broader structures of belief and social order. This research is significant for its documentation and interpretation of material practices that constitute a vital element of cultural memory, providing a durable framework for understanding the long-term relationships between craft traditions, belief systems, and social life in the Indian past.

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Appendix

Chronological Evolution of Footwear in Ancient India – At a Glance

Cultural Period	Approx. Date	Dominant Footwear Type	Material Technology	Functional Purpose	Symbolic or Ritual Meaning
Prehistoric & Chalcolithic	c. 6000–2000 BCE	Simple hide wrapping tied with fiber thongs	Animal hide, plant fiber	Physical protection against terrain and heat	Minimal symbolism; utilitarian function only
Harappan Civilization	c. 2500–1500 BCE	Flat sandals or woven soles with straps	Leather, reed, textile	Hygiene and daily use in urban settings	Social differentiation; regulated craft
Vedic & Epic Periods	c. 1500–500 BCE	<i>Upānah</i> (leather sandals) and early <i>padukas</i>	Hide, wood, natural fiber	Practical footwear for travellers and warriors	Purity, discipline, and social order
Buddhist & Jain Periods	c. 600 BCE–300 CE	Wooden <i>padukas</i> ; barefoot asceticism	Wood, reed, grass fiber	Modest and ethical footwear for monks	Ascetic humility, renunciation, and <i>ahimsa</i>
Mauryan, Kushana and Gupta Period	c. 300 BCE–600 CE	Strap sandals and ornamented <i>padukas</i>	Leather, ivory, wood	Functional and ceremonial use	Royal identity, sacred authority
Early Medieval Period	c. 600–1200 CE	Carved, gilded, or inlaid <i>padukas</i>	Wood, brass, gold, silver	Temple donations and ritual offerings	Devotional symbolism, spiritual transcendence

Note. The figure synthesizes archaeological, literary, and iconographic data to trace technological and symbolic changes in footwear forms. Sources include Jain-Neubauer (2000), Singh (2008), Thapar (2002), and Siddiqui (2024).