CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION TO EUCLID'S GEOMETRY

5.1 Introduction

The word 'geometry' comes form the Greek words 'geo', meaning the 'earth', and 'metrein', meaning 'to measure'. Geometry appears to have originated from the need for measuring land. This branch of mathematics was studied in various forms in every ancient civilisation, be it in Egypt, Babylonia, China, India, Greece, the Incas, etc. The people of these civilisations faced several practical problems which required the development of geometry in various ways.

For example, whenever the river Nile overflowed, it wiped out the boundaries between the adjoining fields of different land owners. After such flooding, these boundaries had to be redrawn. For this purpose, the Egyptians developed a number of geometric techniques and rules for calculating simple areas and also for doing simple constructions. The knowledge of geometry was also used by them for computing volumes of granaries, and for constructing canals and pyramids. They also knew the correct formula to find the volume of a truncated pyramid (see Fig. 5.1). You know that a pyramid is a solid figure, the base of which is a triangle, or square, or some other polygon, and its side faces are triangles converging to a point at the top.

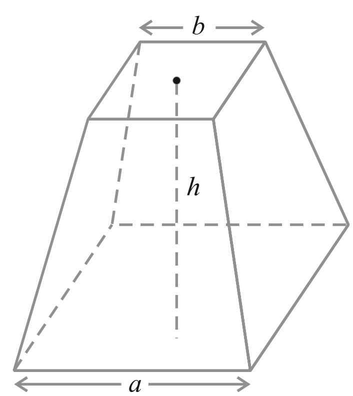


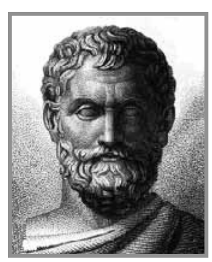
Fig. 5.1 : **A Truncated Pyramid**

In the Indian subcontinent, the excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, etc. show that the Indus Valley Civilisation (about 3000 BC) made extensive use of geometry. It was a highly organised society. The cities were highly developed and very well planned. For example, the roads were parallel to each other and there was an underground drainage system. The houses had many rooms of different types. This shows that the town dwellers were skilled in mensuration and practical arithmetic. The bricks used for constructions were kiln fired and the ratio length : breadth : thickness, of the bricks was found to be 4 : 2 : 1.

In ancient India, the *Sulbasutras* (800 BC to 500 BC) were the manuals of geometrical constructions. The geometry of the Vedic period originated with the construction of altars (or *vedis*) and fireplaces for performing Vedic rites. The location of the sacred fires had to be in accordance to the clearly laid down instructions about their shapes and areas, if they were to be effective instruments. Square and circular altars were used for household rituals, while altars whose shapes were combinations of rectangles, triangles and trapeziums were required for public worship. The *sriyantra* (given in the *Atharvaveda*) consists of nine interwoven isosceles triangles. These triangles are arranged in such a way that they produce 43 subsidiary triangles. Though accurate geometric methods were used for the constructions of altars, the principles behind them were not discussed.

These examples show that geometry was being developed and applied everywhere in the world. But this was happening in an unsystematic manner. What is interesting about these developments of geometry in the ancient world is that they were passed on from one generation to the next, either orally or through palm leaf messages, or by other ways. Also, we find that in some civilisations like Babylonia, geometry remained a very practical oriented discipline, as was the case in India and Rome. The geometry developed by Egyptians mainly consisted of the statements of results. There were no general rules of the procedure. In fact, Babylonians and Egyptians used geometry mostly for practical purposes and did very little to develop it as a systematic science. But in civilisations like Greece, the emphasis was on the *reasoning* behind why certain constructions work. The Greeks were interested in establishing the truth of the statements they discovered using deductive reasoning (see Appendix 1).

A Greek mathematician, Thales is credited with giving the first known proof. This proof was of the statement that a circle is bisected (i.e., cut into two equal parts) by its diameter. One of Thales' most famous pupils was Pythagoras (572 BC), whom you have heard about. Pythagoras and his group discovered many geometric properties and developed the theory of geometry to a great extent. This process continued till 300 BC. At that time Euclid, a teacher of mathematics at Alexandria in Egypt, collected all the known work and arranged it in his famous treatise,



Thales
(640 BC – 546 BC)
Fig. 5.2

called 'Elements'. He divided the 'Elements' into thirteen chapters, each called a book. These books influenced the whole world's understanding of geometry for generations to come.

In this chapter, we shall discuss Euclid's approach to geometry and shall try to link it with the present day geometry.

Euclid (325 BC – 265 BC)
Fig. 5.3

5.2 Euclid's Definitions, Axioms and Postulates

The Greek mathematicians of Euclid's time thought of geometry as an abstract model of the world in which they lived. The notions of point, line, plane (or surface) and so on were derived from what was seen around them. From studies of the space and solids in the space around them, an abstract geometrical notion of a solid object was developed. A solid has shape, size, position, and can be moved from one place to another. Its boundaries are called **surfaces.** They separate one part of the space from another, and are said to have no thickness. The boundaries of the surfaces are **curves** or straight **lines.** These lines end in **points**.

Consider the three steps from solids to points (solids-surfaces-lines-points). In each step we lose one extension, also called a **dimension**. So, a solid has three dimensions, a surface has two, a line has one and a point has none. Euclid summarised these statements as definitions. He began his exposition by listing 23 definitions in Book 1 of the 'Elements'. A few of them are given below :

1. A **point** is that which has no part.
2. A **line** is breadthless length.
3. The ends of a line are points.
4. A **straight line** is a line which lies evenly with the points on itself.
5. A **surface** is that which has length and breadth only.
6. The edges of a surface are lines.
7. A **plane surface** is a surface which lies evenly with the straight lines on itself.

If you carefully study these definitions, you find that some of the terms like part, breadth, length, evenly, etc. need to be further explained clearly. For example, consider his definition of a point. In this definition, 'a part' needs to be defined. Suppose if you define 'a part' to be that which occupies 'area', again 'an area' needs to be defined. So, to define one thing, you need to define many other things, and you may get a long chain of definitions without an end. For such reasons, mathematicians agree to leave