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## UNDERSTANDING INDIAN HISTORY

History is the study of past events. It helps us to understand those processes that enabled the early humans to successfully conquer their environment and develop the present day civilizations. It is not just a study of battles and kings as is normally understood by some. It is an analysis of society, economy and cultural trends over a long period as reflected in available sources. A historian tries to evaluate different situations over a long period and asks questions as to why certain events happened and what was their impact on society at large? Every new evidence or a fresh interpretation of existing evidence by different scholars helps in enriching our knowledge about the past. A historian differentiates between fact and fiction. However, myths which are based on oral tradition of a society may contain memories of past happenings. The historian's job is to ascertain the fact through cross checking of different historical evidence. In this lesson you will learn how India's ancient past was constructed with the help of large varieties of historical evidence and their interpretation.



### OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- understand historical construction of India's ancient past;
- know about various types of source material used by ancient historians and
- identify changing traditions of history writing.

### 1.1 SOURCES FOR RECONSTRUCTING ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

A historian needs source material to reconstruct the past. But sources themselves do not reveal the past. They need interpretation and the historian makes them speak. In fact the historian is expected to track the source, read texts, follow clues, ask relevant questions, cross check evidence to offer meaningful explanation. For example in 1826 Charles Masson noticed the high walls and towers of an old settlement in Harappa Village of western Punjab (now in Pakistan), and five decades later Sir Alexander Cunningham collected some seals from the site, but it took archaeologist John Marshall another fifty years to identify the oldest civilization in the Indus region. We shall offer another example regarding the historian's task to cross check (corroborate) different types of evidence. Nowhere in the sources pertaining to king Harsha (seventh century AD) do we find a mention of his defeat at the hands of Chalukya ruler Pulakesin II. But the inscriptions of Pulakesin II claim a victory over Harsha. In this case it is



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obvious that Harsha's biographer Bana Bhatt who wrote *Harshacharita* deliberately did not mention the defeat of his patron.

The literal meaning of the itihasa is 'thus it was' and it is translated as 'history'. There was a time when only written records were acknowledged as authentic source of history. Written material could be verified, cited and cross-checked. Oral evidence i.e myths and folk songs was never considered a valid source. Earlier historians used myth, fiction and oral traditions in a limited way on account of their lack of authenticity and verifiability. But today these unconventional sources are being used innovatively. Traditions and cultural traits should be studied in the light of other historical facts.

For example the *Mahabharata* is a story of conflict between two sets of warring cousins. One is not sure whether there was a real war as narrated in the epic. Some historians believe that the war did happen while others wait for corroborative evidence for the event. The original story was probably composed by bards known as sutas who generally accompanied Kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and recited poems in praise of victories and other achievements of their heroes. These compositions were circulated orally and preserved as part of human memory.

## LITERARY SOURCES

### 1.2 RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

Most ancient Indian texts contain religious themes and these are known as Vedas. They are assigned to c. 1500–500 B.C. The Vedas are four in number. The Rig Veda mainly consists of prayers. The other three, Sama, Yajur and Atharva-contain prayers, rituals, magic and mythological stories. The Upanishads contain philosophical discussion on atma and pramatma. They are also referred to as Vedanta.

The two epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, seem to have been finally compiled by c.A.D. 400. Of the two, the Mahabharata is attributed to sage Vyasa. It originally consisted of 8800 verses and was called *Jaya gita* or a song dealing with victory. These later got expanded to 24,000 verses and came to be known as Bharata because it contained the stories of the descendents of one of the earliest Vedic tribes called Bharata. A further expanded version of 1,00,000 verses was named Mahabharata. Similarly the Ramayana of Valmiki originally consisted of 6000 verses than 12,000 verses and was finally expanded to 24,000 verses.

In the post-Vedic period (i.e. after BC600) we have recorded a large number of ritual literature on moral values called Sutras. Grand public sacrifices to be performed by rulers are recorded in *Shrautasutra* while domestic rituals connected with birth, naming, sacred thread ceremony, marriage, funerals etc. are prescribed in *Grihyasutras*. This literature was compiled between c. 600–300 B.C.

The religious books of the Jainas and Buddhists refer to historical persons and incidents connected with their respective religions. The earliest Buddhist texts were written in Pali. They are called *Tripitakas* (three baskets) viz. *Suttapittaka*, *Vinayapitaka* and *Abhidhammapitaka*. Of the most important non religious Buddhist literature are the *Jatakas*. They contain the stories of the previous birth of the Buddha. It was believed that before he was actually born as Gautama, the Buddha passed through over 550 births. Each birth story is called a Jataka. These stories throw invaluable light on the social and economic conditions of the period between the fifth and second centuries BC. The Jaina texts were written in Prakrit and were eventually compiled in sixth century AD at Vallabhi in Gujarat. They are called *Angas* and contain the philosophical concepts of the Jainas.



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### 1.3 SECULAR LITERATURE

This category of literature does not have religion as its theme. To this class belongs the *Dharmashastras* or the law-books which prescribe the duties for different social groups. They set out punishments for persons guilty of theft, murder, adultery, etc. The earliest law book is *Manu Smriti*. It was the first book translated by the British and formed the basis of Hindu code of law. *Arthashastra* of Kautilya provides rich material for the study of Indian economy and polity of the Mauryan period. Works on grammar are also sometimes useful for historical reconstruction. The earliest and the most important work on grammar is the *Ashtadhyayi* written by Panini, which is dated by scholars to around 700 B.C.

The works of Kalidasa who lived during the Gupta period comprise poems and dramas. The famous among them are *Abhijananashakuntalam*, *Ritusamhara* and *Meghadutam*. Besides being great creative compositions, they provide us with glimpses of the social and cultural life of the Guptas. For the history of Kashmir we have an important book called *Rajataranagini* written by Kalhana (12<sup>th</sup> AD) Biographies or charitias are very important non-religious texts for writing history. They were written by court poets in praise of their patron rulers. As there is a tendency among them to exaggerate the achievements of the patrons they have to be studied with caution. One such important text is *Harshacharita*, written by Banabhatta in praise of Harshavardhana.

The earliest south Indian literature is called Sangam literature. It was written in Tamil and is secular in nature. It was produced by poets who joined together in assemblies (Sangam) patronized by chiefs and kings during the first four centuries of the Christian era. The literature consists of short and long poems in praise of various heroes, written probably to be recited in the courts. It also constitutes the epics called *Silpadikaram* and *Manimekali*. The Sangam literature is our major source for the study of south Indian society, economy and polity during BC300–AD300. The descriptions given in the Sangam literatures are confirmed by archaeological finds and accounts of foreign travellers.



#### INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.1

1. Give the names of four Vedas?  
(i) \_\_\_\_\_ (ii) \_\_\_\_\_ (iii) \_\_\_\_\_ (iv) \_\_\_\_\_
2. Which is the earliest text on Sanskrit Grammar?  
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3. What are Jatakas?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the language of the south Indian literature called Sangam Literature?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What are the Upanishads?  
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## 1.4 NON-LITERARY SOURCES

## INSCRIPTIONS

Inscriptions are permanent writings engraved on hard surface such as stone, metal or terracotta. Study of inscriptions is called epigraphy. The earliest inscriptions were written on stone. They usually record the achievements, activities and ideas of those who got them inscribed. So we get inscriptions which glorify the exploits of kings or mention donations made by men and women for religious purposes. Those inscriptions which are composed by poets in praise of kings and patrons are known as *prashastis*. Some inscriptions carry dates. Others are dated on the basis of palaeography or style of writing, with a fair amount of precision. The earliest inscriptions were in Prakrit, a name for a language used by ordinary people. In later times, Tamil and Sanskrit were also used to write inscriptions.

The Mauryan king Ashoka was the first person to issue inscriptions. Most of his inscriptions are in Prakrit language written in the Brahmi script though, some in the northwest, were written in Kharosthi. The Aramaic and Greek scripts were used for inscriptions in Afghanistan so that the local people could understand their subject matter. The Brahmi script was first deciphered in 1837 by James Prinsep who was a civil servant during the British rule. Brahmi was written from left to right like Hindi while Kharosthi from right to left. Ashokan inscriptions help us greatly in understanding his religious and administrative policies. From the first century B.C. the kings started granting land to religious people. The Satavahans kings of the Deccan were the first ones to do so. These inscriptions record the concessions granted to the donee ( the receiver of grant ). Such inscriptions help us in finding out the religious and economic activities of the period. Some of these inscriptions are written on stone but most on copper plates. The copper plate charters were probably given as a record of the transaction to those who received the land and were granted concessions.

However, there are some limitations of inscriptional evidence. For example sometimes, letters are very faintly engraved, and thus reconstructions are uncertain. Also, inscriptions may be damaged or letters missing. Besides, it is not always easy to be sure about the exact meaning of the words used in inscriptions, some of which may be specific to a particular place or time.



## INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.2

1. What is the study of inscriptions called?

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2. What are *parashastis*?

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3. Define palaeography?

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4. In which script are most of the inscriptions of Ashoka written?

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**1.5 COINS**

The study of coins is known as numismatics. It not only includes visual elements such as script and images on the coins but also metallurgical analysis. Ancient coins were mostly minted in metals such as copper, silver, gold and lead. The earliest coins found in India contained certain symbols and were called punch-marked coins. They were made of silver and copper (c. sixth century BC onwards). The first coins to bear the names and images of rulers were issued by the Indo-Greeks, who established control over the northwestern part of the subcontinent (c. second century BC). The first gold coins were issued by the Kushanas in c. first century AD. Some of the most spectacular gold coins were issued by the Gupta rulers. Their earliest issues are remarkable for their purity of gold content.

Coins provide useful information regarding economic history as they were used as a medium of exchange. Some coins were issued by guilds or associations of the merchants and craftsmen with the permission of the rulers. This shows the influence of craft and commerce. Coins also portray kings and gods, and contain religious symbols, all to which throw light on the art and religion of the time.



**INTEXT QUESTION 1.3**

1. What is the study of the coins known as?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Name the metals used to make punch-marked coins?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Which dynasty issued the first gold coins in India?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**1.6 ARCHAEOLOGY**

The material remains of the past can be studied with the help of archaeology. Archaeology is a science that enables us to systematically dig the successive layers of old mounds and to form an idea of the material life of the people of the past on the basis of remains found there. Archaeology is very important to study prehistory i.e. the period before the invention of writing. History is basically based on written material. Although writing was known in India by 2500 BC in the Indus culture, its script has not so far been deciphered. Thus, though the Harappans knew how to write but the historians have not been able to read it. Their culture is placed in the period called proto-historic phase. The first script to be deciphered was Brahmi which was used in the Ashokan inscriptions and it belongs to the third century BC.

Excavations have brought to light the tools of early humans in India going as back as seven lakh years. The excavated sites belonging to the Harappan period show the layout of the settlements and the form of the houses in which people lived, the type of pottery, tools and implements they used and the kind of cereals they consumed. In south India some people were buried along with their tools, weapons, pottery and other belongings under big and heavy stones. These graves are known as megaliths. By digging them we learn about the life of people who lived in the Deccan and south India before the third century BC.



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The dates of remains found in excavations are fixed by various methods. The most important of them is the Radiocarbon or Carbon 14 (C14) dating method. Carbon 14 is a radioactive carbon present in all living objects. It decays, like all radioactive substances, at a uniform rate when the object is dead. By measuring the loss of C14 content in an ancient object (wood or bone) its age can be determined.

The history of climate and vegetation is known through an examination of plant residues, and especially through pollen analysis. On this basis it is suggested that agriculture was practised in Kashmir and Rajasthan around 7000–6000 BC. The nature and components of metal artefacts can also be analysed scientifically, and consequently the mines from which metals were obtained are located and stages in the development of metal technology identified. The geological studies provide an idea of the history of soil, rocks etc, where prehistoric man lived. Human history cannot be understood without an idea of the continuing interaction between soils, plants and animal, on one hand, and humans, on the other. Taken together with archaeological remains, geological and biological studies act as important sources for the reconstruction and development of human history.



## INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.4

1. Define Archaeology?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the use of C14 dating?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 1.7 ACCOUNT OF FOREIGN TRAVELLERS

Indigenous literature can be supplemented by foreign accounts. To India came Greek, Roman and Chinese visitors, either as ambassadors or travellers or to seek religious knowledge from time to time. They have left behind an account of the things they saw. To the court of Chandragupta Maurya came a Greek Ambassador called Megasthenes who wrote *Indika*. Its original text is lost but parts of it have been preserved in fragments quoted by subsequent Greek writers. When read together, these fragments, furnish valuable information not only about the administration but also social classes and economic activities of the Mauryan period.

Greek and Roman accounts of the first and second centuries mention many Indian ports and commodities of trade between India and the Roman Empire. The Periplus of the *Erythrean Sea* and Ptolemy's *Geography*, both written in Greek, provide valuable data in this regard.

Of the Chinese travelers, mention may be made of Fa-hsien and Hsuan Tsang. Both of them were Buddhist and came to this country mainly to visit the Buddhist shrines and to study Buddhism. Fa-hsien who came to India in the fifth century AD describes the conditions in India in the age of Guptas whereas Hsuan Tsang presents a similar account of India in the seventh century during the time of king Harshavardhan. Hsuan Tsang also describes in detail the glory of Nalanda University (Bihar) during his times.



### INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.5

1. Who wrote the *Indika*?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Name the Chinese travelers who came to India?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Which Chinese traveller refers to the glory of Nalanda University?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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### 1.8 CHANGING NOTIONS OF HISTORY

It was suggested, particularly by western scholars that ancient Indians had no sense of writing history, But it is not true. Actually, Indian's sense of writing history was different from that of the Westerners. The people from the West recorded events in chronological order while the ancient Indians wrote in a different manner. It can be seen in the texts called the *Puranas* where four different ages called Krita, Treita, Dvapara and Kali are mentioned. And in each age we get detailed lists of the rulers and dynasties. Besides, a large number of inscriptions have been discovered. These give genealogies of kings of various dynasties and also refer to their achievements. It shows that Indians had the basic knowledge of time (period) and space where events were taking place.

Modern research in ancient India history began in 1765 when East India Company took control of Bengal and Bihar. In order to administer the Hindu law, *Manu Smriti* the ancient Indian text on law was translated into English in 1776. These initial efforts of the British to understand ancient laws and customs culminated in the establishment of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. Under its aegis and that of several other such societies Hindu religious and classical texts were translated into English. The greatest impetus to Indological studies was given by Max Mueller, a German born scholar. Soon the British realized that they needed an intense knowledge of Indian scriptures and social systems to rule them better. Even the Christian missionaries felt the need to know more about Indian laws and customs in order to convert them and help the British strengthen their rule. While translating the texts, western scholars wrote about Indian unwillingness to change and they being accustomed to despotic rule.

In 1904, Vincent A Smith wrote *Early History of India*. It was the first systematic history of ancient India. In this book his approach to history was pro *British and he tried to justify* the British rule in India. It served as good propaganda material for the perpetuation of despotic British rule.

The Indian scholars, especially those who had received Western education, were upset about the way the British were presenting India history to their advantage. Guided by the Nationalist ideas some of them took upon themselves the task of rewriting history to show to the world the true glory of Indian culture. Two notable nationalist historians were R.G. Bhandarker (1837–1925) and V.K. Rajwade (1869–1926) who reconstructed social and political history with the help of various sources. While doing so they also attacked some of the social evils like child marriage and caste



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system and promoted widow remarriage. The contribution of P.V. Kane (1880–1972) is remarkable. He wrote a monumental work entitled *History of Dharmasastra*. It highlights the chief elements of ancient Indian society.

These Indian scholars carefully studied ancient Indian texts on polity to demonstrate that ancient Indians had a keen sense of administration. D.R Bhandarkar (1875–1950), an epigraphist, published books on ancient Indian political institutions. H.C. Raychaudhuri (1892–1957) reconstructed the history of ancient India and while doing so criticized V.A. Smith at many points. A stronger element appears in the writings of R.C. Majumdar (1888–1980) who edited a multi-volume *History and Culture of Indian People*. Until 1960, Indian scholars inspired by the idea of nationalism glorified the histories of their respective regions and of India as such. The merit of exploding the myth of despotism goes to K.P. Jayaswal (1881–1937). He wrote about the existence of Indian republics and self-government in ancient India.

After independence, a new trend in history writing took over. There was a shift towards the writing of non-political history with greater emphasis on society and economy. The *Wonder that was India* was one such pioneering work written by A.L. Basham (1914–1986). A further shift is evident in D.D. Kosambi's (1907 – 1966) book *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*. His treatment follows a socio-economic aspect of ancient Indian history. After him a large number of historians followed the trend and focused on social, economic and cultural history. Their main stress was on means of production and the social and economic relationship among different groups of people.



## INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.6

1. Describe the trend that developed in history writing after independence.

## 1.9 THEMES IN INDIAN HISTORY

For an overall knowledge of the past, students are to be made aware of various aspects of society, called THEMES. These themes enable us to learn about developments in different spheres – social, economic, religious, political and cultural. The developments in these spheres are so much interlinked that they often break the boundaries between them, for example when the pastoral society of the early Vedic Age got transformed into settled agricultural society in the later Vedic Age, the political system changed as a consequence. The king who was earlier known as Gopati (lord of cattle) in pastoral society became Bhupati (lord of land) with the development of agricultural economy. And with that the wars began to be fought for acquiring more land instead of cows. The kings gradually became powerful and kingship hereditary. So, we notice that changes in different spheres are related to each other and they often influence major developments. In this course material you will learn about the development in the fields of art, architecture, caste system, science and economy, technology and also about the rise and growth of various religious sects and rituals





**TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

1. Write a short note on secular literature of Ancient India
2. Write five sentences on coins as a source material for reconstructing history?
3. How does archaeology help us in understanding the past?



**ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS**

**1.1**

1. Rig, Sama, Yajur, Atharva
2. Ashtadhyay
3. They contain stories of the previous lives of Gautama the Buddha
4. Tamil
5. Upanishads are the last part of the Vedas. They discuss the philosophy of atma and paramatma.

**1.2**

1. Epigraphy
2. Inscriptions composed by poets in praise of kings and other patrons
3. Style of writing
4. Brahmi

**1.3**

1. Numismatics
2. Silver and Copper
3. Kushanas

**1.4**

1. Science of digging to understand the past.
2. It helps in dating the bones or wood found in archaeological excavations

**1.5**

1. Megasthenes
2. Fa-hsien, Hsuan Tsang
3. Hsuan Tsang

**1.6**

1. Refer para 6 section 1.9

**HINTS TO TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

1. Refer 1.3
2. Refer 1.5
3. Refer 1.6



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