

India is a subcontinent and it has its own unique and vast history. The geographical location of India has played an important role in forming her own history. The nation has a specific geographical situation because of the ranges of the Himalayas in the north, the Arabian Sea in the west, the Indian Ocean in the south and by the Bay of Bengal in the East. The ocean and the ranges of mountains have protected India. However, India has not remained aloof from the world history since ancient times. Many foreign people landed in India crossing the inaccessible boundaries and likewise the Indians went abroad.

The north-south length of India is 9214 km and the east-west width is 2933 km. The land boundary is approximately 9600 km. and the sea boundary is nearly 8000 km. The area of India is about 32.8 lac sq. km. From the point of view of rains, climate and culture, there is such a variety in different provinces that India is not only a huge country but a subcontinent made up of many countries. Such regional diversity has become variegated from the point of view of culture. The great Indian culture is the result of the synthesis of many races and cultures.

Most of the people till now believed that history is nothing but the description of the dynasties, battles, and the kings and emperors but in fact it is not so. History evaluates the political, economic and social situation with the help of the material available in a scientific method. Not only that but it raises the question as to how such an event takes place and clarifies its impact on the society. Sometimes, on getting new artefacts newer definitions are made. It also distinguishes facts from fiction. On the basis of historical evidences, historians describe the truthfulness of the facts.

The Tradition of Writing Indian History

In the West the historical events have been better organized chronologically than in India. It does not imply that Indians were not interested in history. In fact, the method of writing history among the Indians was different from the West. The written history is found in India in the Puranas of Satyuga, Tretayuga, Dwaparyuga and Kaliyuga. From it the list of the rulers and the dynasties are found. It also contains the achievements and the events that happened. In the twelfth century A.D. Kalhan wrote 'Rajtaraginee' history of Kashmir. It is a proof that Indians were not ignorant of history. But it is also a fact that no other such book was found in India.

The English started establishing their rule over India in the 18th century. They got the ancient Indian books translated in English to know the ancient Indian history and the society. Moreover, in order to know the history and culture of ancient India, the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal was established in 1827 A.D. They translated 'Manusmruti' to in English. The German scholar Max Muller presented the historical information about India.

The British also tried to know the ancient languages of India. The British scholar James Prinsep deciphered the inscription of Ashoka in 1827 A.D. Vincent Arthur Smith wrote 'Early History of India', which is the first authentic book about ancient India. Moreover this book was written from the point of view of the British, wherein the British have been praised. He has considered the British rule more useful than the ancient and medieval Indian rule.

The British wrote Indian history from their own point of view whereas the Indian nationalists undertook the task of writing history from nationalistic point of view. They tried to present the greatness of Indian culture to the world. Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar and V.K. Rajvade are two such important nationalist historians.

There was a drastic change in the writing of the Indian history after independence. Gradually the writing of history developed from political history to social, economic and cultural history. The most important authors in this field are A.L. Basham of ‘The Wonder That Was India’ and D.D. Kosambi of ‘Introduction in the Study of Indian History’.

The Content of Indian History

The content of the Indian History is such that it could bring awareness among students regarding thorough knowledge of the past and imbibe one’s own nation’s unique elements of ancient society, religion, state and culture. The content of history is chronological information of India right from the stone age to the 20th century India and the related cause-effect relations. The valuable creation of a historian is to show, not only the big events but how small events play a vital role in changing the history. Art, architecture, religion, Varna, caste, political system economy, trade-commerce, thought-conduct and the ideologies related to them have been the content of history.

With this intention we shall try to study the history of ancient India. The historians distribute the sources of knowing history in two parts: (1) Unwritten sources and (2) Written sources.

Unwritten sources: The historians have recognized the archeological inputs as the unwritten sources. The ancient tools, metals, clay vessels, coins, skeletons, human classical sources are known as unwritten sources. No written materials are available in this type of sources. But the historians scientifically create history with the help of the buried cities, villages and the above mentioned unwritten tools. The major part of the Indian history is prepared from these unwritten sources.

Such physical remains of the ancient India are studied with the help of archeology. The archeologists search for such ancient places and excavate them. On the basis of the remains found, they scientifically assume the time of the place and the life of the human beings of the past. The archeologists have found out many such cultural matters in India. It describes a long history starting from a relic of a human being of 14 lakh years old to the period of Harappa civilization, such as, Old-stone age (Paleolithic), Middle stone age (Mesolithic), New stone age (Neolithic), Copper-stone age (Chaloolithic), Copper-brass age and Iron age.

To decide the time of the excavated remains, they use certain scientific methods. The most important method among them is Radiocarbon- 14 (C-14). According to this method, All the living beings contain C-14. After the death of the living beings, C-14 starts getting assimilated in the atmosphere. The age of the living being is decided on studying the extent of assimilation of the C-14 of the living being in the atmosphere.

From remains of a plant, the age is determined by using pollen-analysis method. The time-period of metals found from rocks and mines can be determines by the study of geology.

Written Sources: Written sources are of 4 types: (1) Religious Literature (2) Non-religious literature (3) Coins and Inscriptions and (4) Travel account of the Foreign Travellers.

(1) Religious Literature: The Indian culture is largely related to religion. Among the religious literature of India, Rigveda is considered the oldest. Its time period is assumed as 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. It is the most ancient Veda, which contains 1028 suktas and 10 mandals (chapters). Rigveda provides the religious, social, political and cultural information of the Aryans. The India, of the time of Rigveda is also called Vedic period.

Besides Rigveda, three other Vedas were written. Thus there are four Vedas. Other Vedas are Yajurveda, Samveda and Atharvaveda. These three Vedas were written later than time period of Rigveda. All the three Vedas include mantras, prayers, religious performances and worldly affairs.

The post-Vedic literature includes Brahmanakas, Aaranyakas, epics, upanisads, puranas and also the religious scriptures of Jain and Buddhist religions. Along with it the Dharmasutras too are included. Among the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are very important.

Puranas are also full of historical matter. However, the period of the formation of the Puranas is not evident. Bhagvat Puran, Matsyapurana, Vishnupurana and Garudpurana are considered important. Upanishads are more than hundred and they are called vedantas. They reveal the important spiritual progress of the then India. They also include great philosophical discussions on soul and supreme soul. Katha, Kena, Mandukya and Mundakupanishads are important from the historical point of view.

The Post-Vedic period is considered up to 600 B.C. Apparently the Dharmasutras and Gruhyasutras of Hindu literature were formed in the sixth century B.C. It also seems that the important literature concerning Buddhist and Jain religions too were written during the same time.

Tripitak is the most important Buddhist religious literature. It includes Suttapitak, Vinaypitak and Abhidhmmapitak. The initial life of Buddha is discussed in Suttapitak. Vinaypitak includes the rules for the Buddhist monks and nuns. Abhidhammapitak includes Buddhist philosophy. Besides this, the knowledge of Jataka stories in Buddhist literature holds great importance.

The literary volumes of the religious literature of Jain religion is known as Agama granthas. Agamas include the philosophical discussions of about 24 Jain tirthankaras. Its first compilation was done during Maurya period. The second compilation was done in the sixth century B.C. in Valabhee of Gujarat.

(2) Non-religious Literature: The non-religious Literature in India includes mainly Smrutignathas, Samhitas, plays and historical books. Manusmriti could be considered an important non-religious literature. As the first law-book of ancient India. Kautilya Arthshastra is also a similar type important book. It gives information about political organization, economics and about the form of state. 'Astadhyayi' written by Panini is considered most ancient and first important book on Sanskrit grammar. The scholars believe that it must have been formed in the sixth-fifth century B.C. 'Diganikay', 'Angutarnikay' and 'Majjimanikay' are important Buddhist literature. They reveal the history of the establishment of the state and the then social situation.

The literary works include Sanskrit plays. The great literary figure Kalidas's Sanskrit plays are very famous. 'Abhigyan Shakuntalam', 'Meghdootam' and 'Ritusamhar' written by him reveal the social condition of India of Gupta period. Apart from it, the plays of great poets Bhasa and Shudrak too could be considered important.

'Rajtarangini' is an important historical book of the twelfth century. It was written by the state poet of Kashmir, Kalhan. It includes the history of Kashmir according to the hypothesis of modern history. Such a historical book is not found in ancient India. 'Harshcharit' is one of the many books in which there is historical reference. It was written by Banbhatt, the court poet of emperor Harsh.

In south India, Sangam literature could be considered the best non-religious literature. They were composed in Tamil language. Many poets have contributed to it. Three such sangams (assemblies) took place in Madurai. The literature that was written in that is called Sangam literature. It includes the appreciation poems of the kings and brave men. These poems used to be sung in courts. This literature includes epics like

‘Sheelpadigarma’, and ‘Manimekmalai’. Sangam literature is useful in understanding the political, social, economical and cultural aspects of South India of the period 300 B.C. to 300 A.D. Sangam literature is supported by findings of archaeologists and foreign travelers.

(3) Coins and Inscriptions: Coins are a great source of studying history. The study of coins is called Numismatics. This scientific tool studies the time, script and metal of the coins and infers historical facts. The symbols and signs on the coins reveal history. The oldest coins in India are the coins of Panchmark. They were made of silver and copper. Their period was 5th century B.C. These coins were of different shapes.



Panchmark Coins

Inscriptions made on pillars and stones are as useful as coins in studying the history. The

oldest inscriptions in India are that of Ashoka's time. The edicts written by poets about the kings are called eulogies. The inscriptions of Ashoka were written in Prakrit language of Brahmi script. The script of the inscriptions found in North India is that of Kharoshthee. And the inscriptions found in Afghanistan are in Aramaic, that is, in Greek script.

The honour of deciphering the inscription of Ashoka goes to James Prinsep. He deciphered the Brahmi script from the inscription in 1827 A.D. Brahmi script was written from left to right. Kharoshthee script was from right to left. The inscriptions of Ashoka are more than 25. We derive administrative, political and religious policies from them. The kings of Satavahana had inscribed writings found near Nasik.

Individual and governmental inscriptions are found in the inscriptions of Ashoka. Some of the inscriptions are found as eulogies. The most illustrious example of it is the inscription of Prayag of Samudragupta, written by poet Harishena. This inscription is inscribed on the Ashoka pillar. The second example is that of appreciation of king Bhoj of Gwalior. Besides this the other historically important sources are: inscription in Hathigufa of king Kharavela of Kalinga, Inscription of Gautami in Nasikgufa, inscription in Devpada of Vijaysen, king of Bengal and Aihol inscription of Chalukya king Pulkeshi II.

Copper plates are also an important source of studying history. Land grant letters were written on copper plates. Individual inscriptions are seen in temples. The dates on them give information of the time when they were inscribed. They also provide information of language. The inscriptions of Gupta period are found in Sanskrit. Inscriptions found abroad too provide information of the history of India. The inscription found from Bogzkoï in Asia Minor, that is Turkey was of 1400 B.C. There is reference of Vedic gods on it. The inscriptions of Persipolis and Bahistoon provide information about the attacks of Iran on India. There is a great similarity between the names of the Babylonian kings with the kings of Iran and India on the earthen plates found from Tel-al-amarna of Egypt.

Inscriptions-Archives provide the time of the king and his kingdom; its boundaries and materials in the kingdom, its social, economic and cultural history.

(4) Monuments and Buildings: The development of the art of architecture (Vastu) is known from the architecture of the residences and temples of kings and people of the time. The Nagar pattern temples of North India, the Dravid pattern temples of south India and Beser pattern temples of Dakkhan are the important documents of architecture. Stupas, Chaityas, Viharas and Temples are spread up to South-East Asia and Central Asia along with India. It indicates the propagation and spread of Indian culture. The great evidence of that is the Borobudar temple of Java, built in 9th century B.C.



Gandhar Art Pattern

Statues

In order to study the history, statues are important source of information. The sculpture of statues are seen in larger extent of Kushan, Gupta and post-Gupta period. The statues of Kushan period have been greatly impacted by foreign art. The arts of Gandhar and Mathura patterns are the best among the arts of statues. The statues found from Saanchi, Amravati, Bharhut and Bodhagaya exhibit clearly the well developed art of statues.

Art of Painting

The art of painting has been an important source of studying Indian history since the time of the paintings of Stone Age. Its important illustration is the cave-paintings of Bhimbetka. Such an art was developed in the Gupta period. The world famous paintings of Ajanta are the climax of the development of painting. There have also been such evidences from Elora and Bagh.



Bhimbetka

Descriptions of Foreign Travelers

From ancient times, India has been in contact with foreign countries. Many foreigners have been coming to India. Whatever they have written about India, is an important source of studying history. In ancient India, pilgrims had come from Greece, Rome and China. Some were ambassadors, some had come to study religion and some others come for trade and commerce. They have written a lot about India. The history can be written very clearly by referring local literature and travel accounts of the foreigners.

During the rule of Chandragupta Maurya the ambassador of Seleucus Niketor, Megasthenis had sojourned in India. He had written an important book called 'Indica'. However, the original book is not available. But the writers after him have mentioned the book often. Indica provides the valuable information about the administration,



Borobudur Temple

social system and trade-commerce of India during the time of Chandragupta Maurya.

The Greeks and Romans have also given information about the headquarters of trade and important ports of the 1st and 2nd century B.C.. They have given detailed report on the trade between India and Rome. The important books among them are Natural Geography of Tooley and Pliny. Besides this, "Periplus of the Arithenian Sea" book of an unknown author also provides information about Indian ports.

The Chinese pilgrims had come to India for the love of Buddhist religion. Fahien, Huientrang and Itsing were prominent among them. They have given the first hand detailed picture of Buddhist religion, Buddhist pilgrim places, Emperor Harshavardhna, Nalanda University and the then Indian society.



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EXERCISE

1. Answer the following questions in detail :

- (1) What is history? Mention the sources to study it.
- (2) Give information of Non-written sources of writing history.
- (3) How do historians determine time?
- (4) Explain the tradition of writing of Indian history.
- (5) Explain: 'The descriptions of foreign travelers are important sources of knowing history.'

2. Answer briefly :

- (1) How many Vedas are there? Which are they?
- (2) Discuss the important Buddhist books.
- (3) Give an idea about Sangam literature
- (4) Explain: Coins are important source of knowing history.
- (5) Mention the monuments found in India

3. Choose the correct option from the given alternatives and give answers :

- (1) Which method is followed to decide the time of the remains
 (A) C-8 (B) C-9 (C) C-11 (D) C-14
- (2) Which are the most important books of Buddhist literature?
 (A) Agam (B) Veda (C) Tripitak (D) Sangam
- (3) Who is the writer of the book Rajtaranginee?
 (A) Kalhan (B) Bilhan (C) Merutung (D) Kalidasa
- (4) Where was Sangam literature constructed?
 (A) Calicut (B) Pulicat (C) Pataliputra (D) Madurai
- (5) Which coins of India are believed to be the oldest?
 (A) Panchmark coins (B) Gadhaiya coins (C) Kaniya coins (D) None of these.

