

Revision Notes

Chapter - 1

Tracing Changes Through a Thousand Years

- The maps by Arab geographer Al-Idrisi (1154) and a French cartographer (1720) give a large sketch of the Indian subcontinent as known in earlier times.
- In Al-Idrisi's map, south India is where we would expect to find north India and Sri Lanka is the island at the top. Place-names are marked in Arabic and there are some well-known names like Kanauj in Uttar Pradesh (spelt in the map as Qanauj).
- The second map seems more familiar to us and the coastal areas in particular are surprisingly detailed. This map was used by European sailors and merchants in their voyages.
- The science of cartography differs in different time periods. When historians read documents, maps and texts from the past, they have to be sensitive to the different historical backgrounds - the contexts - in which information about the past was produced.

New and Old Terminologies:

(i) Historical records exist in a variety of languages which have changed considerably over the years. The difference is not just with regard to grammar and vocabulary; the meanings of words also change over time.

(ii) The term Hindustan was coined by Minhaj-i-Siraj, a chronicler who wrote in Persian for areas around Punjab, Haryana, and the lands between Ganga and Yamuna. He used the term in a political sense for lands that were a part of the dominions of the Delhi Sultan. The areas included shifted with the extent of the Sultanate but the term never included south India.

(iii) In the early sixteenth century, Babur used Hindustan to describe the geography, the fauna and the culture of the inhabitants of the subcontinent. This was somewhat similar to the way the fourteenth-century poet Amir Khusrau used the word "Hind".

(iv) In Hindi, the term 'pardesi' was used to describe an alien. In Persian, it was called 'ajnabi'.

(v) Historians today have to be careful about the terms they use because they meant different

things in the past. A city-dweller, therefore, might have regarded a forest-dweller as a “foreigner”, but two peasants living in the same village were not foreigners to each other, even though they may have had different religious or caste backgrounds.

Historians and their Sources:

- (i) Historians use different types of sources to learn about the past depending upon the period of their study and the nature of their investigation.
- (ii) Roughly from 700 to 1750 AD, historians rely on coins, inscriptions, architecture and textual records for information. But there is also considerable discontinuity. The number and variety of textual records increased dramatically during this period. They slowly displaced other types of available information.
- (iii) Through this period, paper gradually became cheaper and more widely available. People used it to write holy texts, chronicles of rulers, letters and teachings of saints, petitions and judicial records, and for registers of accounts and taxes.
- (iv) Manuscripts were collected by wealthy people, rulers, monasteries and temples. They were placed in libraries and archives. These manuscripts and documents provide a lot of detailed information to historians but they are also difficult to use.
- (v) There was no printing press in those days so scribes copied manuscripts by hand. As scribes copied manuscripts, they also introduced small changes - a word here, a sentence there.
- (vi) These small differences grew over centuries of copying until manuscripts of the same text became substantially different from one another. We are totally dependent upon the copies made by later scribes. As a result, historians have to read different manuscript versions of the same text to guess what the author had originally written.
- (vii) On occasion, authors revised their chronicles at different times. For example, the fourteenth-century chronicler Ziyauddin Barani wrote his chronicle first in 1356 and another version two years later. The two differ from each other but historians did not know about the existence of the first version until the 1960s.

New Social and Political Groups:

- (i) The study of the thousand years between 700 and 1750 is a huge challenge to historians largely because of the scale and variety of developments that occurred over the period.
- (ii) Some of the developments were the introduction of the Persian wheel in irrigation, the

spinning wheel in weaving, and firearms in combat. New foods and beverages arrived in the subcontinent - potatoes, corn, chillies, tea and coffee.

(iii) It was a period of great mobility. Groups of people travelled long distances in search of opportunity. The subcontinent held immense wealth and the possibilities for people to carve a fortune.

(iv) One such group of people was that of the "Rajputs", name derived from Rajaputra, the son of a ruler. Other groups of warriors were Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, Ahoms and Kayasthas (a caste of scribes and secretaries).

(v) Between the eighth and fourteenth centuries, the term was applied more generally to a group of warriors who claimed Kshatriya caste status. The term included not just rulers and chieftains but also soldiers and commanders who served in the armies of different monarchs all over the subcontinent.

(vi) A chivalric code of conduct - extreme valour and a great sense of loyalty - were the qualities attributed to Rajputs by their poets and bards.

(vii) Throughout this period, there was a gradual clearing of forests and the extension of agriculture and changes in their habitat forced many forest-dwellers to migrate. Others started tilling the land and became peasants.

(viii) These new peasant groups gradually began to be influenced by regional markets, chieftains, priests, monasteries and temples. They became part of large, complex societies, and were required to pay taxes and offer goods and services to local lords.

(ix) Some peasants possessed more productive land, others also kept cattle, and some combined artisanal work with agricultural activity during the lean season.

(x) Furthermore, as society became more differentiated, people were grouped into jatis or sub-castes and ranked on the basis of their backgrounds and their occupations. Ranks were not fixed permanently, and varied according to the power, influence and resources controlled by members of the jati. The status of the same jati could vary from area to area.

(xi) Jatis framed their own rules and regulations to manage the conduct of their members. These regulations were enforced by an assembly of elders, described in some areas as the jati panchayat.

(xii) But jatis were also required to follow the rules of their villages. Several villages were governed by a chieftain.

Region and Empire:

- (i) Large states like those of the Cholas, Tughluqs, or Mughals encompassed many regions.
- (ii) A Sanskrit prashsti that praises Delhi Sultan Balban tells that he was ruler of a vast empire that stretched from Bengal in the east to Ghazni in Afghanistan in the west and included all of the South India (Dravida).
- (iii) People of different regions - Gauda, Andhra, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat - apparently fled before his armies.
- (iv) There were considerable conflicts between various states. Occasionally, dynasties like the Cholas, Khaljis, Tughluqs and Mughals were able to build an empire that was pan-regional - spanning diverse regions. Not all these empires were equally stable or successful.
- (v) When the Mughal Empire declined in the eighteenth century, it led to the re-emergence of regional states. But years of imperial, pan-regional rule had altered the character of the regions.
- (vi) Across most of the subcontinent the regions were left with the legacies of the big and small states that had ruled over them. This was apparent in the emergence of many distinct and shared traditions: in the realms of governance, the management of the economy, elite cultures, and language.

Old and New Religions:

- (i) People's belief in the divine was sometimes deeply personal, but more usually it was collective. Collective belief in a supernatural agency - religion - was often closely connected with the social and economic organisation of local communities.
- (ii) Some of the changes in Hinduism were- the worship of new deities, the construction of temples by royalty and the growing importance of Brahmanas, the priests, as dominant groups in society.
- (iii) Their knowledge of Sanskrit texts earned the Brahmanas a lot of respect in society. Their dominant position was consolidated by the support of their patrons - new rulers searching for prestige.
- (iv) This period saw the emergence of the idea of bhakti - of a loving, personal deity that devotees could reach without the aid of priests or elaborate rituals.
- (v) Merchants and migrants first brought the teachings of the holy Quran to India in the seventh century. Muslims regard the Quran as their holy book and accept the sovereignty of the one God, Allah, whose love, mercy and bounty embrace all those who believe in Him, without regard to social background.

(vi) Many rulers were patrons of Islam and the ulama - learned theologians and jurists. And like Hinduism, Islam was interpreted in a variety of ways by its followers.

- There were the Shia Muslims who believed that the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, was the legitimate leader of the Muslim community,
- and the Sunni Muslims who accepted the authority of the early leaders (Khalifas) of the community, and the succeeding Khalifas.
- There were other important differences between the various schools of law (Hanafi and Shafi'i mainly in India), and in theology and mystic traditions.

Thinking about Time and Historical Periods:

(i) Time reflects changes in social and economic organisation, in the persistence and transformation of ideas and beliefs. The study of time is made somewhat easier by dividing the past into large segments - periods - that possess shared characteristics.

(ii) In the middle of the nineteenth century, the British historians divided the history of India into three periods: Hindu, Muslim and British.

(iii) This division was based on the idea that the religion of rulers was the only important historical change, and that there were no other significant developments - in the economy, society or culture. Such a division also ignored the rich diversity of the subcontinent.

(iv) Few historians follow this periodization today. Most look to economic and social factors to characterise the major elements of different moments of the past.

(v) During the medieval period, the societies of the subcontinent were transformed often and economies in several regions reached a level of prosperity that attracted the interest of European trading companies.