



History of Ancient India

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Historiography of Ancient India

The study of Indian history and culture started in the 18th century with the establishment of British rule in India. A need was felt to understand the native culture, tradition and laws in order to administer the country well. It is in this context that the research in Indian history started. The British scholars and officers associated with this research are known as the Orientalists. Between the 18th and 20th century there were different approaches in the study of Indian history known as the Orientalist School, Utilitarian School, Nationalists School, Marxist School and the Revisionist School. The first two schools together are known as the Imperialist school as well.

1. The Imperialist School –

a. **The Orientalist School** – The study of ancient history of India was initiated by some British scholars like William Jones, Henry Cole Brooke, Charles Wilkins, Cunningham etc. These scholars explored the Indian past and culture e.g. William Jones led the foundation of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. This provided a crucial forum for the Oriental studies. He translated a number of texts, like the 'Abhigyan Shakuntalam' of Kalidasa, which reached to a wide European readership. The sustained efforts of these scholars- in exploring the ancient Indian texts and cultures- contributed a lot in the study of Indian history.

Contributions:

- Ancient Sanskrit texts were brought to the light by these scholars. They produced critical/systematic editions of many ancient texts.
- Cunningham led the foundation of the study of Indian architecture. Archaeological survey of India came into existence in 1871.
- The systematic study of ancient Indian history was initiated by the orientalist scholars. E.g. James Prinsep deciphered the Brahmi Script.

Limitations-

- They had many pre-conceived ideas about India and they argued that the Indians were more inclined towards religion and spiritualism, and material life didn't interest them as much. This argument was an indirect explanation for the backwardness of the India.
- They were interested mainly in exploring Sanskrit texts but they neglected the Pali and Prakrit texts which reflect the life of common people more closely.

b. **Utilitarian School** – The rise of this school was due to the industrial revolution in Europe (Britain) as the Industrial revolution was not only a material change, but it brought a complete change in the British society. These changes touched the academia also where the systematic study of Indian history was going on. This school opposed the Orientals as it believed that the orientalist scholars had given an undue praise to the Indian past. We can

include scholars like James Mill, John Stuart Mill and Thomas Macaulay in this group. James Mill was critical of the Indian people and their cultures. He claimed that the contemporary as well as the ancient India were barbarous and anti-rationalism. According to him, the Indian Civilisation showed no concern for political evolution and India had been ruled by a series of despots.

Limitations-

1- This school distorted the Indian history. James Mill communalised the Indian history by dividing it into the Hindu, Muslim and British period.

2- James Mill was the first scholar to propose the 'theory of oriental despotism' which was later developed by Karl Marx. In other words, he tried to prove that India was ruled by a number of despots right from the ancient times; she had no tradition of democracy. In this way he tried to justify the despotic and alien character of British rule.

2- Nationalist School –

As a reaction to the imperialist school, a new school with a nationalist approach emerged. Scholars like R.C Majumdar, Prof. Hem Chandra Rai Chowdhary, A.S. Altekar, K.P Jaiswal etc. belonged to this school. They criticised the utilitarian ideas about India and tried to focus on certain political and cultural achievements of the ancient India. Initially inspired by the 19th century social reforms movement, the Indian historical scholarship gradually became overtly anti-imperialist. They rejected the periodisation of Indian history into Hindu period and Muslim period, but retained the basis of division for such periodisation i.e. the conquest of North India by Muhammad Ghori and the foundation of Turkish rule was regarded as the beginning of medieval period (they gave the terms 'ancient' and 'medieval' for the periodisation of Indian history).

As the Indian demand for political rights and a representative government grew stronger during 1920s, nationalist scholars began to attribute the highest achievements in the field of political thoughts and practice to the ancient Indians, thus, imbining confidence and self-respect among the Indians. E.g. parallels were drawn between Kautilya's social and economic policies and social legislation of Bismarck. Republics of the Mahajanpad era were compared with the ancient Greek republican city states.

Limitations-

1- The Indian scholars strongly defended the Hinduism and it was often held that the Vedas represent its purest form, thus completely ignoring the fact that the Hinduism was at best an umbrella term for various strands of the Indian religious thoughts, beliefs and practices present in the Indian subcontinent.

2- They ignored the essentially composite character of the Indian culture by retaining the same basis for the periodisation of the Indian History, and consciously supported the cause of Hindu chauvinism.

3- They too focused mainly over the Sanskrit literature and neglected the Pali and Prakrit literature.

4. They remained fixated to the political developments and outstanding cultural achievements but neglected the history of the common people.

3- Marxist School –

D.D Kosambi led the foundation of the Marxist school. He suggested the need to identify the major turning points in the life of people which could form the basis for the periodisation of the early Indian history. In his view, the changes in the history are closely linked with the material and technological changes. E.g. Beginning of the use of iron in agriculture in the Ganga Valley created an agriculture surplus which helped in the 2nd Urbanisation in the Mahajanpad period. Such crucial changes can provide a rational basis for the periodisation of the Indian History. Thus, it is possible to argue that the medieval period doesn't begin with the advent of Turkish rule but it begins with the end of Gupta rule towards the end of the 6th century CE, which marks the beginning of some significant developments in the Indian society on account of the land grants. Later scholars like R.S Sharma, D.N Jha and V.N.S Yadav got associated with this school. Irfan Habib and other scholars of the Aligarh school also contributed in developing this school of thought.

From the 1960's onwards this school brought a major revolution in the study of ancient history. We can underline these changes in the following manner. These scholars tried to establish the relationship between the basic structure and the super structure. The Economic structure is supposed to be the basic structure while the political, social structure, culture and ideas are supposed to be the super structure. The basic structure was recognised as a major factor behind the changes occurring in history.

In due course of time, this school of thought too received a challenge from the revisionist scholars.

4- Revisionist school

In due course of time, Marxist historiography received a challenge from a number of scholars known as the revisionist scholars. For example, Bridget Allchin and Raymond Allchin revised the earlier views about the Harappan civilisation. D.K Chakravarty challenged the Marxist historiography by trying to undermine the role of iron in the 2nd Urbanisation. Similarly, B.D. Chattopadhyay and Ranvir Chakravarty countered the views given by R.S Sharma and his group on the decline of trade, money economy and urban centers in the early Medieval Period.

Recently some important contemporary issues like environment, gender discrimination as well as exploitation of weaker sections have become a part of the historiography, thus, making the study of history a more diverse and multi-faceted domain. This is a welcome development.

More recently, some scholars who are guided by the Hindutva agenda, are trying to propagate new theories in the Indian historiography. But they are not professional historians and the views propounded by them have not been substantiated by proper research works. So, presently such views can't be taken seriously. But if this line of thought continues and does some proper research work, an alternative school of historiography may emerge in the future.

THE STUDY

Sources for the study of Ancient India

For the study of history of Ancient India we can use two different sources of study - literary source as well as archaeological source.

Literary Sources:

For the sake of convenience we can divide ancient literature in two groups- indigenous literature and foreign literature. Even indigenous literature can be divided into religious literature and secular literature. Likewise, even the religious literature can be divided into the different sections such as Brahmanic literature, Buddhist literature and Jain literature.

Brahmanic Texts-

Among the Brahmanic texts, Vedas are the earliest. From the Rig Veda we mainly get information about the social, cultural and economic conditions; but less information about the political conditions of the time. After the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda are significant as the source material for the study of Ancient India. Samveda is not equally important as most of the Suktas in the Samveda had been taken from the Rig Veda itself. As the source material, Atharva Veda has some more importance because it gives us information about the assimilation of the Aryan and Non-Aryan cultures.

After the Vedas, come the Brahmanas; these are the prose works which throw light on the ancient people. From the Brahmanas we get information about the sacrificial cult and ritualism in the life of the Vedic people. Even the Aranyakas and the Upanishads are being used as the source materials. They give us the information about the philosophical refinements of the Vedic people.

Then, there are the six Vedangas- literally meaning, the limbs of the Vedas- their knowledge is necessary to understand the Vedic literature. These are such as Shiksha (phonetics), Kalpa (ritual), Jyotishya (astronomy), Nirukta (etymology), Vyakarna (grammar) and Chhanda (meter). The Kalpa Sutra can be divided into different sub-texts like Sruta Sutra, Griha Sutra and Dharma Sutra. From the Sruta Sutra, we get the knowledge about the sacrificial cult. Griha Sutra gives us the information about family life and rituals. From Dharma Sutra, we gather the information about contemporary political and social ideals.

During this period, the Dharma Sutra literature was composed by the scholars like Baudhayana, Apashtamba, Vashista and Gautama. The Dharma Sutra literature focuses over social and religious aspects of that time. After that, from the early Christian centuries, Smriti literature in the form of Shastras started to be composed in this series. The Manusmriti is the first one. It gives us information about political, social & cultural life during post-Mauryan period in detail. After Manusmriti a number of texts like Yajnavalkya Smriti, Brihaspati Smriti, Naradasmriti, Parasarasmriti, etc. were compiled. They give us information about the Gupta Age. Some of them are purely legal texts.

For the study of Ancient India, Puranas are also important source materials. They are 18 Mahapurans and many more upapuranas. They give us information about the chronology of kings. Recently, some scholar (Romila Thapar mainly) have developed a socio-economic approach in specifying the time period and chronology in Puranas.

The great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata are important source materials for the study of Ancient India. These epics cover a longer period in the Ancient India. They were finally compiled in the Gupta age. So, the material culture reflected in the great epics corresponds to the material culture of the Gupta age.

Non-Brahmanic Texts-

Along with the Brahmanic literature, the Buddhist and Jain literature have also made their contribution in the study of history. The earlier scholars gave priority to the Brahmanic literature only because they believed that the Brahmanic literature represented the core aspect of Ancient India. But in the due course of time, Buddhist and Jain literature, which were composed in local dialects, gained importance. It was concluded that the Brahmanic literature reflected the mood of Brahmanic elements of the society. So, it was elitist in its approach. On the other hand, Pali and Prakrit literature reflected the popular mood and condition of the lower strata in society. Although, even they have a pro-Buddhist and Jain doctrinal biases respectively.

Buddhist text like Tripitakas- Sutta Pitak, Vinay Pitak and Abhidhamma Pitak, Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Divyavadana, Ashokavadana etc. are important. The Jataka stories are one of the fifteen books of the Khudakka Nikaya of the Sutta Pitak. We get the information about the economic, social, cultural and to a certain extent, even political condition of India from these texts. Likewise among Jain texts Bhagvatisutra, Kalpasutra, Parishistaparvan, Obaisutra etc. are important. The Jain texts have not been used as extensively by the historians as the Buddhist texts.

Among the secular literature, we find texts a number of texts like the Ashtadhyayi of Panini. The Kautilyan Arthashastra is a significant text on polity. Its time period is not very clear. Its earlier portion corresponds to the Pre-Mauryan age and its later part corresponds to the Post-Mauryan period. But, on the basis of similarity in the terminologies used in the Ashokan inscriptions and the Kautilyan Arthashastra, we can conclude that most of its parts correspond to the Mauryan age. Although, neither any Mauryan king nor their capital, Pataliputra, has been mentioned in this text. The Kautilyan Arthashastra is an encyclopedia for the study of Mauryan age; although the information given by this text should be corroborated by other sources as well.

Apart from that, we have a number of other secular texts, such as the Mahabhashya of Patanjali, the Mudrarakshasha of Vishakadatta and the Nitishara of Kamandaka. From the

Mahabhashya of Patanjali, we get the information about Post-Mauryan age. Likewise, Vishakadatta gives us information about the progress of Chandragupta and the Mauryas. The Nitishara focuses over the political ideas during the Gupta age.

Tamil Texts-

For the study of ancient Tamil Society, Sangam literature is an important source material. There are two types of Sangam poems- Akam and Puram. Akam (the inner field) deals with the personal or human aspects, like Love, in an abstract or metaphorical manner. Puram (the outer field) deals with all other aspects of human experience such as valor, ethics, benevolence and social life. A. K. Ramanujan describes the Puram poetry as a kind of public poetry. We can include Patinenmelkanakku- the eighteen major anthology series, which include Ettuthokai, the eight anthologies, and Pattupattu, the ten idylls as well as some portions of Tolkappiyam (a Tamil Grammar) into the Sangam literature. Patinenkilkanakku is a collection of eighteen poetic works created during the 'post Sangam period' (between 100 - 500 CE). Tiruvalluvar's Tirukkural and the epics- Silappadikaram and Manimekalai were composed during the 5th- 6th century CE. Early medieval period Tamil literature includes intense devotional poetry of the Bhakti Saints.

Telugu and Kannada literature becomes available from the early medieval period.

Foreign Accounts-

The Foreign accounts work as a supplement to the indigenous account. We can underline two positive features in the foreign accounts; firstly, they give us the information about some regions about which our indigenous literature is almost silent. Secondly, most of the foreign accounts are supposedly free from the ideological prejudices which we find in the indigenous literature.

But, they have their limitations too. We can underline some distortion in facts and figures in the foreign accounts because the foreign travelers were alien to the Indian situation. They did not have the proper knowledge about India. For example, Megasthenes divides Indian society into seven castes. He says that slavery didn't exist in India.

Here also, for the sake of convenience, we can divide the foreign accounts into different segments such as the Greek and Roman accounts, the Chinese accounts and accounts of the Arabian travelers etc.

Greek and Roman Accounts-

The Greek and Roman accounts are important source materials for the study of Ancient India. The Greek companions of the Alexander focused over the history of North West India. Herodotus was the first Greek author who mentioned India. But, Aristobulus, Curtius, Annasimetus and Nearchus left an account of the early India. Before the excavation of the Harappan cities, the clear cut date in Indian history was supposed to start from 326 BCE. When

William Jones identified the name Sandrocotus with the Chandra Gupta Maurya, the dates in Indian history became clear.

The Indica of Megasthenes is a significant source material for the study of Mauryan period but his account is not available today. Whatever information we get from Indica, we receive it through the references given by the classical authors of subsequent period such as Ptolemy, Strabo, Pliny and Diodorus etc. Texts like the 'Periplus of the Erythrean Sea' by an anonymous writer, are important for the history of the Indian Ocean trade.

Chinese Account-

The accounts of Fahian and Huen-Tsang are important source materials for the study of the Gupta age and the period of Harsha respectively. Yijin, a 7th century Chinese traveler, lived at the Nalanda monastery for 10 years.

Arabian Account-

Among the Arabian accounts, the account of Suleiman, Al-Masudi, Ibn Khurdadab, etc. are significant. Suleiman talks about the Pala and the Pratihara kings in the 9th century CE. Likewise, Al-Masudi came to India in the 10th century A.D. He mentions the Rashtrakuta kings, whom he calls Vallabha Raja.

In this way, the literary sources definitely contribute a lot in the study of the history of the ancient India. But we should be cautious about the fact that the literary sources have its own limitations. First, there is this problem of extrapolation. It means that, while analysing a text, it becomes difficult to identify the actual time period when different portions were added in a text because some portion are added much later than the other portions. For example, the 10th Mandala in the Rig Veda had been added during the later Vedic period while the other mandalas belong to the early Vedic period. Second, in the ancient texts, there is some problem of stratification as well. Third, we underline the element of subjectivity in a literary text. It means the text mainly reflects the author's point of view. Fourth, usually the religious literatures were composed from the religious point of view. Looking for the economic and political clues in these texts is problematic.

Recently, new dimensions have been added to the analysis of the literary source. Firstly, there is an initiative for the sociological study of literary texts, i.e. the background of the author should be taken into consideration before his account is examined. Secondly, even the methods from other disciplines are being applied to the analysis of literary source, for example, the methods of analysis from economics, statistics, anthropology, sociology, computer etc. are being used in the analysis of the facts and figures. Likewise, on the basis of method of linguistics and computer analysis, the dates in the ancient India are being studied.

Archaeological Source:-