UNIT 1: SOURCES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- identify the various source materials for the study of history of ancient India
- discuss different literary sources for the study of ancient Indian history
- discuss the importance of various archaeological sources for the study of ancient Indian history.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of this course. In this unit, we are going to discuss the sources available for studying the ancient Indian history. Sources are the very backbone of history. Unfortunately, there was no systematic tradition of history writing in ancient India. But, over the years the long untiring efforts

of historians have brought to light numerous sources for the study of the past. These sources are in the form of indigenous literature, foreign literature, inscriptions, coins and material remains. Broadly the indigenous literature and foreign literature can be termed as ***Literary Sources***, while the inscriptions, coins and material remains are called the ***Archaeological Sources***.

1.3 SOURCES OF ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

The history of ancient India can be fairly reconstructed only with the help of the sources. The sources are broadly divided into literary sources and archaeological sources. Literary sources are further divided into indigenous literature and foreign literature. Archaeological sources are divided into inscriptions, coins and material remains. We are now going to discuss all these different forms of sources separately in sub- headings.

1.4 LITERARY SOURCES

Every one of you know the meaning of the term 'literary' that is something in written form. Though there was absence of proper history writing in ancient India, yet there was a huge body of literary materials which speak about our past. However there is no single literary record that can be used as a common source for the whole period of ancient Indian history. The *Vedas*, *Epics*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and other religious scriptures throw much light on the history of ancient India. Besides these the accounts of foreign travellers also help us in reconstructing our past. Let us discuss them in detail in the following sub-sections.

1.4.1 Indigenous Literature

Do you know what indigenous literature is? Indigenous literature means the native or local literature. In the context of our study it means Indian literature. Scholars consider ancient Indian literature as a great help to know the ancient history of India. Ancient literature of India is mostly of religious nature. But there are also

host of secular literature which may well be of great help to reconstruct the history of ancient India.

Old Hindu texts like the ***Vedas***, the ***Upanishadas***, the ***Puranas***, the ***Epics*** and other ***Dharmashastras*** depict a clear picture of India of that period. The Vedic literature proves to be an important source for ancient Indian history. The *Rig Veda* is the oldest Indian literature and it gives us a good deal of information regarding the socio-religious and political condition of the early Indo-Aryans. Equally informative are the other three *Vedas* namely - *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva Veda*. The ***Upanishadas*** tell us about the philosophical thoughts of our ancestors. You surely know that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the two greatest Epics of India. These two Epics describe the social and political life of the later Vedic Aryans. The *Puranas* also serve as important sources. Do you know how many *Puranas* are there? There are altogether eighteen *Puranas*. But only five of them namely, *Matsya*, *Vayu*, *Bhabisya*, *Vishnu* and *Bhagavata* are historically important. These *Puranas* give dynastic lists of different ancient Indian dynasties like Haryanka, Sishunaga, Nanda, Maurya, etc.

Buddhist and Jain literatures are also very important sources. The stories of ***Jataka*** provide numerous information regarding the different aspects of the contemporary society. Famous Buddhist literature like *Dipavamsha* and *Mahavamsha* enlighten us about the history of Buddhism. *Milindapanho* is another important Buddhist text. Among the old Jain literature mention may be made of *Bhagawati Sutra*, *Kalpa Sutra*, *Parishistha Parvana*, etc. In the *Bhagawati Sutra*, we find the names of the sixteen great states (*solasa mahajanapada*) of the 6th century B.C. The *Kalpasutra*, composed by Bhadrabahu, describes the life stories of the Jain religious heads called *Tirthangkaras* including Lord Mahavira. The *Parishistha Parvana* of Hema Chandra gives us different information regarding the Mauryan age.

In addition to these religious texts, a number of ***secular***

literatures had been written in ancient India. In this regard mention may be made of Panini's *Astadhyayi*, Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*, Kautilya's *Arthasastra*, Bhasa's *Sapnabasavadattam*, Sudraka's *Mricchakatikam*, Kalidas's *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, *Raghuvamsam*, *Kumarasamvawam* and *Malabikagnimitram*, Vishakhadatta's *Mudra Rakshasha* and *Devichandraguptam*, etc. All these literary works give us useful data regarding the social, political, economic and religious life style of contemporary India.

We are highly fortunate that we have a few ***scientific literary works*** in ancient India that give us a glimpse into the scientific activities of those days. These sources inform us that India, in olden times, was far advanced in the field of astronomy, mathematics and medical science. The *Pancha Siddhant* of Varahamihir is regarded as the Bible of Indian astronomy. Aryabhatta wrote outstanding astronomical books like *Dasagitika Sutra*, *Aryastasata*, *Aryabhattiya*, etc. *Charak Sanghita* by Charak is an important book on medical science. All these books, though dealing with different branches of science, contribute a lot towards our historical knowledge.



LET US KNOW

Aryabhatta was the most renowned astronomer of ancient India. By linking astronomy with mathematics, Aryabhatta opened up a new era in the study of Indian astronomy. He was the first Indian astronomer to declare that the earth rotates around the sun. He also gave scientific explanations for lunar eclipse. Again, it was Aryabhatta who calculated that the solar year consists of 365 days. For his remarkable contributions to the field of astronomy, Aryabhatta has been regarded as the Indian Newton.

Biographical writings are also an important form of sources. The biographical literatures are mostly about kings written by their court poets. Being written by the court poets these biographies are naturally full of exaggerations. However, we may find immense historical information by thoroughly scrutinizing these works. Some important examples of

biographies are *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta, *Vikramankadevacharita* of Bilhana, *Gaudavaho* of Vakpatiraja, *Ramacharita* of Sandhyakara Nandi, etc.

Equally important are the ***local histories*** written on different regions of our country. Among these local histories the most authentic work is undoubtedly the history of Kashmir known as *Rajtarangini* by Kalhana. It was probably the first historical book of India. While composing this great book, Kalhana followed a scientific approach by examining all available data. The *Rajtarangini* deeply impressed the future historians of Kashmir and a number of chronicles were composed in the model of this work.

Another important source for the history of ancient India is the ***Sangam Literature*** of South India. The *Sangam* Literature is the creation of the Tamil poets. In Tamil language *Sangam* means the confluence of poets. *Sangam* Literature furnishes us with vast information regarding the social, economic, religious and political condition of South India. *Manimekhaloi*, *Kurala*, *Silappadikaram*, etc. are the few important examples of this rich literary period.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is the nature of the ancient literature of India?

.....

Q 2: Name the oldest Indian literature?

.....

Q 3: What do you know about Milindapanho?

.....

Q 4: Who wrote *Pancha Siddhant* ?

.....

1.4.2 Foreign Literature

Indian is fortunate to have a variety of foreign literature. Foreign literature generally includes the writings of the foreigners some of whom came to India with different purposes and left accounts of

their travel of this country. But there were also some other historians like Herodotus and Taranath who never visited India, but gathered information from different sources and mentioned it in their writings. Herodotus is a Greek historian. For being the forerunner in the field of history writing, Herodotus is considered the 'Father of History'. Taranath is a Tibetan historian. His books named *Dulva* and *Tangyur* are important sources for the history of Buddhism.

Among the foreign writers the Greeks were the first to visit India. Alexander's invasion of India inaugurated a new era of Indo-Greek relationship. The mighty Greek conqueror was accompanied by many historians like Nearchus, Onesicritus, etc. These historians recorded remarkable information about North-Western India and of course about Alexander's campaign. However, the most remarkable Greek historian to have visited India was none other than Megasthenes. Megasthenes was the ambassador of the Greek general Seleukos to the court of the Mauryan Emperor Chandragupta Maurya. His book on India called I*ndika* is of immense historical value. Among other important writings the most outstanding are Ptolemy's *Geography*, Pliny's *Natural History*, etc. The *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* by some anonymous Greek sailor is another essential book to know about the ports, harbours and commercial life of India in the 1st century A.D.

The Chinese ***pilgrims*** came to India to study Buddhism in the land of its birth. During the reign of the Gupta monarch Chandragupta II, Fa-Hien visited India and stayed here for a period of about fifteen years. He left a very vivid descriptive account of his visit to this country. I-Tsing was another notable Chinese traveller. He composed a number of books on Buddhism in India. However, the most renowned Buddhist scholar to visit India was undoubtedly Hiuen-Tsang. Hiuen-Tsang came to India during the reign of Harshavardhana. He made a wide travel throughout India and his travel diary called *Si-Yu-Ki* forms an important source for the socio-religious history of that period. Although Buddhism was his main

focus, Hiuen-Tsang left some important information regarding the contemporary political situation in India.

The writings of the Mohammedan scholars, who visited India since the 8th century A.D., are also very significant sources. Al-beruni came to India with Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. In his book called *Tahaqiq-i-Hind*, he gives a beautiful account of the Hindu manners, science and literature. Another important work is the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhajuddin Siraj. Among the other Mohammedan writers mention may be made of Al-Masudi, Nizamuddin, Hasan Nizami, etc.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q 5: Who wrote Indika?

.....

Q 6: Name the books written by Taranath.

.....

Q 7: With whom Nearchus and Onesicritus came to India?

.....

Q 8: Who was the author of Gaudavaho?

.....

Q 9: Who was Al-Masudi?

.....

1.5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

Archaeology is considered the backbone of the art of historiography. It provides the concrete picture of our past. It has three branches- epigraphy or inscription, coins or numismatic, and material remains or monuments.

1.5.1 Inscriptions

Do you know what the term 'inscription' means? An inscription

is writing engraved on stones, pillars or caves by the ruling kings or in some instances by his officers. The kings issued inscriptions for different purposes such as to commemorate victory, to proclaim administrative decrees or to announce grant of land or wealth to some institutions, etc. Sometimes inscriptions were used for religious purposes too. Inscriptions were known as *Sasanavali*.

Figure 1.1: Pillar Inscription



(Source: *Google Images*)

As historical sources, inscriptions are of great value. Inscriptions give us a lot of significant information regarding political, administrative, commercial, and socio-religious condition of that particular period. Sometimes inscriptions contain dates of the rulers which greatly helps the historians of later years to fix the date of a ruler accurately. Inscriptions also give information about the policies and achievement of the concerned rulers and throw light on the prevailing languages. They were written in all languages such as Prakrit, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telegu, etc.

Now, what we find from the foregoing discussion is that inscriptions play a vital role in supplying a vast range of information. That is why historians consider inscriptions an invaluable source. Even the information supplied by other forms of sources is considered acceptable when they are supported by some ***epigraphic*** evidence.

Among the Indian inscriptions, the inscriptions of Asoka are many in number and of immense historical value. In order to propagate the teachings of Lord Buddha, Asoka issued a good

number of edicts (inscriptions). These were engraved on rocks or pillars and cave walls. They inform us about the religious zeal of the great Mauryan monarch. They are still the most important source for the history of the Mauryan age.

The Asokan tradition of issuing inscriptions was keenly followed by the rulers of the post-Mauryan age too. During that period we find hundreds of inscriptions that provide us useful information. In this respect, the most prominent inscription is the ***Allahabad Pillar Inscription*** of Gupta Emperor Samudragupta. This inscription throws a flood of light on the conquests of Samudragupta. The ***Hathi Gumpha*** *Inscription* of king Kharavela informs us about the history of Kalinga. The ***Aihole Pillar*** *Inscription* of Chalukya King Pulakesin II is another important record. Similarly important are the ***Junagarh Rock Inscription*** of Rudradaman, ***Bhitari Pillar*** *Inscription* of Skandagupta, etc.

In addition to these inscriptions, there are some other public records in the form of **land grants**. Now, what is a land grant? The kings of ancient India donated lands to Brahmanas and other religious institutions. As a part of such land grants, the kings issued some inscriptions engraved usually on copper plates. These copper plate inscriptions contain information about the reigning king, the lineage, names of officials, donated land and about the recipient person or institutions. These are really storehouses of relevant information.

1.5.2 Coins

Coins have proved to be a vital source of authentic information of Indian history. They are significant archaeological sources for the study of contemporary socio-cultural, political and economic condition of ancient India. Thousands of coins belonging to different rulers have been found in various parts of India.

The coins provide us the names, titles, royal portraits, images of the deities worshiped and actual dates of the kings to whom they

belonged. Such information as provided by coins helps us to form a correct idea of the history of these rulers. For example, the images of the deities worshiped found on a coin point to the religious leanings of the ruler concerned. From the coins we may come to know about the economic development of the respective states. The abundance of gold and silver coins of best quality in a particular area easily point to the economic prosperity of that state. Hence historian Ramesh Chandra Mazumdar has rightly remarked: "The importance of ***numismatics*** for the study of the economic condition of a country is too obvious to need a detailed consideration." Similarly, the artistic design, shape, and type of the coins signify the religious and the cultural development of a particular period. Some Roman coins belonging to the 1st century A.D. have been found in various parts of South India. These coins undoubtedly prove India's trade relation with the old Roman Empire.

Figure 1.2: Gupta Coins



(Source: *Google Images***)**

1.5.3 Material Remains

India is rich in archaeological remains which includes monuments and sculptures. Monument means notable sites or structures of historical importance. It includes the remains of old buildings, temples, ***viharas, stupas,*** images of different Gods and Goddesses and so on.

The oldest monumental source for the history of ancient India is undeniably the archaeological remains of the Harappan or Indus

Valley Civilization. The remains of the Indus Valley inform us about the existence of a flourishing civilization prior to that of the Aryans. Thus, the ancient architecture and sculptures help us a lot to understand the evolution of artistic and cultural development of our ancestors. At the same time the study of these monuments may inform us about different schools of art, its development and amount of foreign influence upon it.

Figure 1.3: A Monument



Source: *Google Images*

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Answer the followings:

Q 10: To whom does the Hathi Gumpha Inscription belong to?

.....

Q 11: To whom does the Junagarh Rock Inscription belongs to?

.....

Q 12: Mention different categories of archaeological sources.

.....

Q 13: Write how inscriptions help us in studying ancient Indian history in about 60 words.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit you have learnt that,

- Sources are very important for studying history.
- Sources are broadly divided into two groups; literary and archaeological.
- Literary sources are further divided into indigenous and foreign literature. The Vedas, Epics, Puranas, Upanishadas and other Dharmasashtras reflect immense light on the history of ancient India. Besides them the, accounts of foreign travellers also help us in reconstructing our past.
- Archaeological sources are sub-divided into inscriptions, coins and material remains. They provide concrete knowledge of our past. These different types of sources help us in reconstructing the early history of our country.



1.7 FURTHER READING

1) Majumdar, R.C., Raychaudhuri, H.C., Datta, K. (1986). *An Advanced History of India*. New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd.

2) Maiti, P.(2001): *Studies in Ancient India*, Kolkata, Shreedhar Prakashani

3) Raychaudhuri, H.C. (1972). *Political History of Ancient India*. Calcutta, University of Kolkata

4) Sharma, L.P. (1981). *Ancient History of India (pre-historic Age to 1200 A.D.)*. New Delhi, Vikas Publication House Pvt. Ltd.

5) Tripathi, Ramashankar (1999). *History of Ancient India*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Religious.

Ans to Q No 2: Rig Veda.

Ans to Q No 3: An important Buddhist text.

Ans to Q No 4: Varahamihir.

Ans to Q No 5: Dulva and Tangyur.

Ans to Q No 6: Megasthenes.

Ans to Q No 7: Alexander

Ans to Q No 8: Vakpatiraja

Ans to Q No 9: Mohammedan

Ans to Q No10: King Kharavella

Ans to Q No11: Rudradaman

Ans to Q No 12: Inscription, coin and monuments

Ans to Q No 13: Inscriptions are writings engraved in different languages on stones, pillars or caves by the ruling kings or sometimes by the officials. They were also called Sasanavalis and were used to commemorate victory, announce land grant, etc. Inscriptions provide us lots of significant informations regarding political, administrative, commercial and socio-religious conditions of the period to which it belonged and thereby helps in the study of the ancient Indian history.

1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each question within 50 words)

Q 1: Name the four Vedas.

Q 2: Mention the popular term used for Inscription.

Q 3: Who authored *Indika*?

Q 4: Name the travel diary of Hiuen Tsang.

B) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q 1: Why are the indigenous literary sources important for reconstructing the ancient Indian history?

Q 2: Write a short note on the accounts of Chinese travellers on India.

Q 3: Write a short note on the importance of coins of ancient India.

C) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the importance of literary sources in the reconstruction of ancient Indian history.

Q 2: How do the archaeological sources help in studying the history of ancient India?

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