UNIT 9 : SOURCES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MEDIEVAL INDIA

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1. Learning Objectives

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- Native
- Foreign

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- describe and discuss the varied literary sources for the study of medieval India,
- discuss the foreign literary accounts that throw light on the medieval times and,
- explain the various archaeological sources and remains of medieval India.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

The Unit will introduce us to the varied sources available for the extensive study of the medieval period. The sources are mainly literary and archaeological sources.

The medieval India is rich with abundant sources left by the natives as well as the foreigners. Besides the invaluable accounts of the native and the foreign travellers, coins and inscriptions have also been featured in the unit as they provide a clear glimpse into the different aspects of medieval life. This Unit will discuss the various sources that help us to reconstruct the history of medieval India.

9.3 LITERARY SOURCES OF MEDIEVAL INDIA

The accounts of the Muslim scholars and the foreign travellers throw much light on the history of medieval India. The court historians were appointed with the purpose of maintaining a chronological account of the events that occurred. However, there is a doubt on the objectivity of the records as most of them were exaggerated accounts in favour of the powerful rulers.

- **Native Literary Sources**

We will now look into the native literary texts that give us a vivid description of the medieval period.

The *Chachnama,* originally written in Arabic and later translated to Persian, gives in details, the account of the Muslim victory over Sind. The history of Sind and Muslim invasions can be known from the Mir Mohammad Masoom's work, **"Tarikh-i-Sind".** Ferishta, in the book *"Muhammad-Bin-Kasim"* tells us about the contemporary history of the Sultanate period.

Al-Beruni was one such Muslim scholar who had accompanied Sultan Mahmud of Ghajni and he left behind a rich source of history in his work *Tahqik-e-Hind.* In this book, he describes the Mahmud invasions and many socio-political details. This book forms a primary source of information for all matters, social, religious, political etc. *Tarikh-i-Yamini* is a work on the reign of Sabuktagin and Sultan Mahmud.

In *Zaimul Akhbar,* we find the account of Mahmud of Ghajni and the work, *Tarikh-i-Baihaqi* indulges in details regarding the court and nobilities

of Mahmud.

Taj-ul-Massir which was authored by **Hasan Nizami** throws light on the history of the Delhi Sultanate and especially on the reign of Qutub-ud-din Aibak. It gives the details about the military exploits of Aibak and about the reigns of Iltutmish till 1217 AD.

Tabaquat-i-Nasiri written by **Minhaj-us-Siraj** gives a detailed account of the history of the Delhi Sultans till 1206 AD. It gives us a firsthand account of the invasion of Muhammad Ghori.

Amir Khusru was another luminary who was more of a poet than a historian, but his works *Tughlaq-nama, Khazain-ul-Futuh* and *Khiran-us-Sadain* are a valuable source of information. *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* by Ziauddin Barani gives an account of the Tughlaq dynasty.

The *Babur-nama* records the life of Babur with a few gaps and it is held in high esteem by the historians. The work was translated in Persian four times and one of it was completed by Abdur Rahim Khan-i-khanan, the son of Bairam Khan. The *Humayun-namah* by **Gulbadan Begum,** sister of Humayun, was written at the command of Akbar. The *Humayun-namah* is a memoir that throws little light on Babur but reveals *Humayun's* life through the battles, his victories and defeats, the hardships he faced. Besides, the *Humayun- namah* tells a lot about the society and the customs that prevailed then.

Mirza Haider's *Tarikh-i-Rashidi* gives an interesting account of the battle of Kanauj which is difficult to find in any other contemporary works. Mirza was Babur's cousin and he praised Babur for his generosity while describing the habits and character of Humayun clearly.

We find a detailed and authentic account of Akbar's time in the work *Akbarnamah* by **Abul Fazl.** His mastery over style is reflected in his work. The Akbarnamah is divided into three parts. The first part consists of the royal history from Timur to Humayun, including the birth of Akbar. The second part deals with the reign of Akbar till 1602, due to Abul Fazl's sudden death in the same year. The events have been narrated chronologically and

recorded in detail. The other most important work of **Fazl** was *Ain-i-Akbari* which is a compilation of the administrative system under various departments. The works have historical value due to their detailed observation of the economic conditions and political events of that time.

Tabaqt-i-Akbari was another important work by **Nizamuddin,** who served as Akbar's Mir Bakshi. It is divided into three parts and it gives an account of the Muslim rule from the times of the Ghaznavids in India upto Akbar's time. However, Nizamuddin does not throw light on Akbar's views on religion and the author himself abstains from providing any critique to the events.

Tarikh-i-Badauni or *Muntakhab-ut-Twarikh* was penned by **Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni.** It was written during Akbar's time and it records the reign of Babur, Humayun and Akbar. Badauni was a critic of Akbar's religious policy and condemned Abul Fazl, Faizi and others. He disliked Akbar's policy of toleration and also his providing patronage to men of different religious backgrounds.

Jahangir wrote his autobiography named *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* which is an account of his reign. The memoir is rich in detail regarding the social, political, military and other aspects of life of his times. However, the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* records Jahangir's reign till the seventeenth year and the last two years of his reign was recorded by *Mutamid Khan.* Another comprehensive work on Jahangir was *Iqbalnamah-i-Jahangiri* by **Mutamid Khan.** *Maasir-i-Jahangiri* was also an important work of this period based on original sources.

Padshah namah was another illustrious work on the reign of Shah Jahan. **Abul Hamid Lahori's** *Padshah namah* is considered important because of the fact that it covers 20 years of Shah Jahan as an Emperor. *Shah Jahan Namah* of **Enayet Khan** and *Amal-i-Shahi* of **Md Salih** offers detailed accounts of the important persons of his reign. For the study of the period of Aurangzeb we can get valuable information in the writings of **Khafi Khan's** *Muntakhab-ul-Lubab,* **Mirza Muhammad Kazim's** *Alamgirnama*, **Muhammad Saqi's** *Maasir-i-Alamgiri,* **Sujan Rai Khatri's** *Khulasat-ut-*

Tawarikh, **Bhimsen's** *Nushka-i-Dilkusha* and **Ishwar Das's** *Fatuhat-i-Alamgiri.*

- **Foreign literary sources**

Francois Bernier who spent 12 years in the court of Aurangzeb gives a detailed account of the life in the harem. He also mentions about women and specifically the royal ladies. His work is carried forward by another foreign traveller, **Nicolai Manucci** who had served under Dara and then under Aurangzeb. His work **Storia Do Mogor** is all about the royal men and women and the households along with the harem culture. He also mentions the stern steps taken by Aurangzeb against the consumption of wines, drugs, music and indulgence in such other acitivities.

Among the literary sources by foreign travellers, we must mention **Ibn Batuta,** a Morrocan traveller who came to India during the time of Md Bin Tughlaq. His work *Kitab-ur-Rehla* describes the social and political condition of India during Md Tughlaq's reign. It is an account of his experience in Delhi and Madurai and of the cuisines of the Sultanate rulers. However, it lacked objectivity. Another foreign traveller was **Abdur Razzak,** a Persian who has given an account of the Vijayanagar kingdom and its administration. His work serves as a primary source on the cultural history of the Vijayanagar kingdom. ***Marco Polo*** who visited South India in the 13th century has written about the maritime trade that flourished. ***Nicolo Conti*** has also written on the society and economy of South India.

Regional histories also form a rich source for the study of medieval India. In this category, reference must be made of the histories of the Sultani *Empire* like the Twarikh-i-Sind (the history of Sind) by **Mir Muhammad Masum. Ghulam Hussain's** work on the history of Bengal, *Riyaz-us-Salatin,* records the event from Bakhtiyar Kahlji's invasion till 1788. The history of the Nizam Shahi dynasty of Ahmadnagar is mentioned in the work by Sayyid Ali titled *Burhan-i-Masir. Twarikh-i-Gujrat* by **Abu Tarab Ali** throws light on the history of Gujrat. *Twarikh-ul-Mulek* by **Rafiuddin Shilagi** records the history of the Bahmani kingdom. The history of Kashmir upto 1149 AD, is recorded in the grand work, *Rajtarangini* authored by **Kalhana**. *Prithvi Raj*

Raso by **Chand Bardai** throws light on the Rajput history and more specifically on the conflict between Prithvi Raj Chauhan and Muhammad Ghuri. For a dependable history of the Chauhan rulers of Ajmer, the *Prithvi Raj Vijaya Kavya* by **Jayanaka** provides much information.

- **Bards and Oral sources**

Bards or charans and oral narratives also offer a deep insight into the historical events of any period. These are passed on from generation to generation and associated with families. In Rajasthan, the bardic compositions consists of epic poems, which fall under two categories- one in which the poems are dedicated to the brave Rajput heroes while the other is related to the matters of a Rajput household. Dingala was the language used in the composition of these chronicles. Khyats of Rajputana were composed as an inspiration from the Mughal royal court. As a prose chronicle, **khyats** recorded the facts as witnessed by the author.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

1. Name the Muslim scholar that who accompanied Mahmud of Ghazni in his expeditions.

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2. Who was the author of Tarikh-i-Firuz-Shahi?

   .....

3. The history of which dynasty is recorded in Burhan-i-Masir?

   .....

9.4 ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

Inscriptions and coins fall within the category of archaeology. Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions and includes the task of deciphering the text and examining the information. We will focus on inscriptions and coins of medieval India to understand that era.

- **Inscriptions**

Monumental works of the Sultanate period reveal the trend of intermingling of Hindu and Muslim architectural traditions and structural designs throw light on the socio-cultural outlook of the sovereigns and nobles of that age.

The three scripts belonging to the early medieval period of South India that have been found are- Grantha, Tamil and Vatteluttu. While the first was used for writing Sanskrit, the other two were used for writing Tamil. Donative records in Tamil have been found in the South. Donative records include the grant of royal land or installation of religious images inscribed on the walls, gateways and railings, in stone or copper plates

Khanaqah-i-Mu'alla, Jami Masjid of Srinagar, the mosque of Sayyid Muhammad Madani and the **tomb of Sultan Zain Ul-'Abidin'**s mother are a few monuments that enables us to reconstruct the history of Kashmir. **Khanaqah-i- M u'alla** is a muslim shrine dedicated to the Muslim preacher, Shah Hamadan. It was constructed by Sultan Sikander in 1395 in wood. The **Khanaqah-i Mu'alla** gave a new lease of life to the once dying trend of wooden architecture and woodwork. **Jam-i-Masjid** is a reminder of the large scale conversions to Islam necessitating the establishment of a big mosque to accommodate a large gathering. **The tomb of Sultan Zain Ul-'Abidin'**s mother known as Budshahs Dumath testifies to the use of tombs. The double domed tomb reveals the direct impact of Timurid architecture. The epitaphs are bi- lingual - Sanskrit at the top and Persian at the bottom. The calligraphic art of the period can be traced from it. **Nasakh** and **Nasta'liq** was used in carving the inscription. The monuments throw light on the impact of Persian and Central Asian architecture on Kashmir.

Inscriptions manage to capture the historical moments as a record of a specific event. The inscriptions are found in the temple walls or columns or a stone slab. The inscriptions of South India throw light on the practice of religious donations. Some scholars believe that the inscriptions often refer to different groups belonging to different background contrary to the textual facts that talk of elite composition in matters of land grants. The inscription

mentions the peasants, warriors, their wives, daughters besides the priestly class and the royalty. The inscriptions also reveal much detail about the political and social structure through the religious grants, which can be of great social significance.

Noboru Karasimha used inscriptions specially the stone inscriptions to understand different village communities. Inscriptions help in building a chronological structure of the regional kingdoms, along with deepening our knowledge of the functioning of the religious institutions and role of patronage besides other things.

Epigraphic records have been found in Delhi composed by the merchant families. There is a reference to Palam Baoli inscription of 1276 AD composed by **Pandita Yogisvara** written in Sanskrit. The Sarban stone inscription in Sanskrit found in Delhi refers to the construction of a well in the Sarban village. The terms "Mlechcha" and "Turuska" were seen to be used in the inscription.

While inscriptions serve as a primary source and are durable, they alone cannot provide a whole picture of an event and hence need to be supplemented or corroborated by textual data and facts.

- **Numismatic sources or Coins**

New patterns of coinage emerged with the advent of the Muslim rule in India. The Sultanate coins carried inscriptions on both sides either in Arabic or in the Persian script. Inscribing the ruler's name on the coin had Islamic importance as it implied the definitive assumption of legal power by him. Thus, inscribing the name of the rulers with their titles and issuing them on auspicious occasions like victory of a fort, town etc along with the date in the Hijri era and the place of the issue of coins became a practice.

Mohammad Ghori after the second battle of Thanesvara or Tarain in 1192 struck gold coins with the name Mohammed bin Sam in Nagari script and an image of a seated Lakhsmi on the obverse. Iltutmish issued silver coins with legends inscribed on them. Balban issued coins with his name inscribed in Arabic. Mohammed Tughluq was known for his experimentation

with coinage. His earlier coins in gold and silver had a standard weight of 170 grains. He later started issuing gold dinars of 201.5 grains and silver adlis of 144 grains.

The Delhi Sultans minted a type of coin termed *jital.* Basically, it was used for cash transactions below the value of half a *tanka.* The prices of essential commodities and wages were paid in *jitals.* From the mid-thirteenth century the silver content of each *jital* was denominated as *gani* or *dramma.* However, the coins started disappearing from circulation in early 1315.

The Khalji and the early Tughluq periods were marked by the increase in the size of the silver coin. This indicates that money was used extensively.

The art of minting is best reflected in the Chola coins. The Chola rulers issued gold coins. Similarly, most of the Vijayanagar coins were of gold. Harihara and Devaraya II are known to have issued silver coins. The Vijayanagar rulers used Nagari, Kannada and Telugu scripts on their coins.

Foreign trade formed an integral part of the medieval economy. While the economy flourished in medieval northern India, there were inroads of foreign silver from the European shores and countries like Iran. However, the crisis of silver compelled the Delhi Sultanate to resort to a system of copper coinage. The fall of silver had an impact on the Indian Ocean trade. The proportion of gold increased at the expense of silver. Copper coins flowed in from Egypt and was employed in the Indian Ocean Trade. In the fifteenth century, South India maintained its gold standard and the region continued to maintain an export surplus by sending spices of the Levant. On the positive side, metal coinage continued to exist due to the maritime trade that resulted in the entry of gold and silver.

The introduction of token currency was an innovative practice in medieval India. Under the Mamluk dynasty, during the rule of Shamsuddin Iltutmish (1210-1235), Arabic inscriptions with geometric designs were found on the coins. On the coins of the Bengal Sultan, Ilyas Shahi Sultan, both calligraphy and geometric designs were found. Living beings were found to be depicted in the coins of Akbar and Jahangir.

The coins of this period provide information on the political pursuits and economic conditions of the Delhi Sultanate. Even though coins were minted under the earlier establishment, yet it was after the coming of the Sultanate rule that a serious attempt was made at standardization of the monetary economy.

Mahmud of Ghazni issued silver coins with his name inscribed on them in two different languages. The denominations of the coins were *tanka*, *dirhams and jitals.* Iltutmish's coins describe him as *Khalifa*. Balban issued silver coins called *tanka* while Alaudin Khilji struck coins with honorific epithets including the title of *Sikandar al Sani*-meaning the second Alexander. Though the coins of the Tughlaqs were superior in design and execution compared to those of the Khiljis yet many of their monetary experiments turned out as a failure. Copper coins were mostly issued during the Lodi rule. Provinces of Bengal, Jaunpur, Deccan, Malwa and Gujarat also minted coins.

The coins of Balban lacked aesthetic appeal and these were recognised only for their monetary value. However, despite the prohibition imposed by Islam on displaying animals or human beings, Akbar and Jahangir struck coins with their portraits on them. Jahangir issued coins which carried his image and that of Begum Nur Jahan.

The Mughal coins were struck in three metals-gold, silver and copper. By the fifteenth century, coinage had been heavily debased and the main coin was a copper tanka with a progressively declining silver alloy. Sher Shah eliminated the debased coinage and minted the first *rupee*, a coin of 178 grains of virtually pure silver. By the sixteenth century, *rupee* had become the basic unit of currency actually in use. The influx of New World silver from 1550 to 1750 expanded money circulation not only in the absolutist terms of metal but most important in terms of transaction.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

4. What was particular about the coins of Akbar and Jahangir?

   .....

5. Who struck coins with the honorific title of Sikandar al Sani?

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6. Calligraphy and geometric designs are found in whose coins?

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7. Who composed the Palam Baoli inscription?

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8. Which monument speaks of the dying trend of wooden architecture and woodwork?

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9.5 HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MEDIEVAL INDIA

The historiography of medieval Indian history is a multifaceted field that has evolved over time with contributions from various scholars.

Colonial Historiography: The study of medieval Indian history began in earnest during the colonial period when European scholars, primarily British, started exploring and documenting India's past. Notable figures include James Mill, who wrote "The History of British India," and Mountstuart Elphinstone, whose work "History of India" provided significant insights into medieval Indian society and politics.

Nationalist Historiography: With the rise of Indian nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian scholars began reinterpreting medieval Indian history from an indigenous perspective. Figures like R.C. Majumdar, Jadunath Sarkar, and K.M. Munshi played key roles in this movement. They sought to highlight India's rich cultural heritage and challenge colonial interpretations of its past.

Marxist Historiography: Marxist historians like D.D. Kosambi and R.S. Sharma offered new insights into medieval Indian history by analyzing so-

cioeconomic structures, class dynamics, and the role of feudalism. They emphasized the material conditions of medieval Indian society and the struggles of the peasantry and lower classes.

Subaltern Studies: Subaltern scholars, notably Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, critiqued mainstream historiography for its focus on elites and rulers. They advocated for a history from below, highlighting the agency and resistance of marginalized groups such as peasants, women, and tribal communities.

Postcolonial Historiography: Postcolonial scholars like Romila Thapar and Satish Chandra challenged colonial and nationalist narratives, emphasizing the need for multiple perspectives and a critical engagement with sources. They explored issues of identity, religion, and cultural exchange in medieval India.

Regional Histories: Medieval India was a diverse and fragmented landscape, and scholars have increasingly focused on regional histories to understand its complexity better. Studies on specific regions like South India, Bengal, Gujarat, and the Deccan have enriched our understanding of local dynamics and cultural interactions.

Interdisciplinary Approaches: Recent trends in historiography have seen a shift towards interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating insights from archaeology, literary studies, art history, and anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach has deepened our understanding of medieval Indian society and culture beyond traditional historical sources.

Overall, the historiography of medieval Indian history is characterized by a rich diversity of perspectives, methodologies, and debates, reflecting the complexity and dynamism of India's past.



9.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this Unit, you have learnt that:–

- Sources- literary, archaeological, provide valuable information about the different aspects of medieval life.
- The Indo-Muslim scholars and historians give us a valuable insight

into the political history of the medieval period.

- The monuments throw light on the socio-cultural as well as religious leanings of the rulers of the medieval times.
- Similarly the numismatic sources of the medieval era reveal much about the finance and trade activities along with the prosperity level of the regional kingdoms.



9.7 FURTHER READING

1) Chattopadhyaya, D.P. (2011). *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization in Vol III, Part I, Economic History of Medieval India, 1200-1500.* Delhi, India: Pearson Longman.

2) Singh, Vipul (2009). *Interpreting Medieval India Vol. I. Early Medieval Delhi Sultanate and Regions (circa 750-1550).* New Delhi, India: MacMillan.

3) Maiti, Provatansu and Kumar Saha, Prabhat, (2000). *Medieval India (1206 A.D.-1707 A.D.).* Calcutta, India: Sreedhar Publishers.

4) Salma Ahmed, Farooqui, (2011). *A Comprehensive History of Medieval India: From the twelfth to the Mid-Eighteenth Century.* Delhi, India: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd.



9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to the Q No. 1: Al-Beruni

Answers to the Q No. 2: Ziauddin Barani

Answers to the Q No. 3: Nizam Shahi dynasty of Ahmednagar

Answers to theQ No.4: Despite the prohibition imposed by Islam on displaying animals or human beings, Akbar and Jahangir struck coins with their portraits on them.

Answers to the Q No. 5: Alaudin Khilji

Answers to the Q No. 6: In the coins issued by the Bengal Sultans

Answers to the Q No. 7: Pandita Yogisvara

Answers to the Q No. 8: Khanaqah-i Mu'alla



9.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

(A) Very Short Questions (answer within 50 words):

Q.1. Name the author of Kitab-ur-Rehla?

Q.2. Who minted the first rupee and mention its value?

Q.3. Name the source that throws light on the struggle between Prithvi Raja III and Muhammad Ghuri?

Q.4. What is the special characteristic of the tomb of Zain-al-Abidin's mother?

(B) Short Questions (answer within 150 words):

Q.1. Which script was used in their coins by the Vijayangara rulers?

Q.2. What does the "Tarikh-i-Badauni" critique?

Q.3. Name a literary source on the regional history of the Sultani period?

(C) Long Questions (answer within 300-500 words):

Q.1. Describe the literary sources of medieval India and their importance for the historians.

Q.2. Discuss the significance of the numismatic sources in reconstructing history with reference to the history of Medieval India.