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The Significance of Ancient Indian History

The study of ancient Indian history is important for several reasons. It tells us how, when, and where people developed the earliest cultures in India, how they began undertaking agriculture and stock raising which made life secure and settled. It shows how the ancient Indians discovered and utilized natural resources, and how they created the means for their livelihood. We get an idea of how the ancient inhabitants made arrangements for food, shelter, and transport, and learn how they took to farming, spinning, weaving, metalworking, and the like, how they cleared forests, founded villages, cities, and eventually large kingdoms.

People are not considered civilized unless they know how to write. The different forms of writing prevalent in India today are all derived from the ancient scripts. This is also true of the languages that we speak today. The languages we use have roots in ancient times, and have developed through the ages.

Unity in Diversity

Ancient Indian history is interesting because many races and tribes intermingled in early India. The pre-Aryans, the Indo-Aryans, the Greeks, the Scythians, the Hunas, the Turks, and others made India their home. Each ethnic group contributed its mite to the evolution of the Indian social system, art and architecture, language and literature. All these peoples and their cultural traits commingled so inextricably that currently they can be clearly identified in their

original form.

A remarkable feature of ancient Indian culture has been the commingling of cultural elements from the north and south, and from the east and west. The Aryan elements are equated with the Vedic and Puranic culture of the north and the pre-Aryan with the Dravidian and Tamil culture of the south. However, many Munda, Dravidian and other non-Sanskritic terms occur in the Vedic texts ascribed to 1500–500 BC. They indicate ideas, institutions, products, and settlements associated with peninsular and non-Vedic India. Similarly, many Pali and Sanskrit terms, signifying ideas and institutions, developed in the Gangetic plains, appear in the earliest Tamil texts called the Sangam literature which is roughly used for the period 300 BC–AD 600. The eastern region inhabited by the pre-Aryan tribals made its own contribution. The people of this area spoke the Munda or Kolarian languages. Several terms that signify the use of cotton, navigation, digging stick, etc., in the Indo-Aryan languages have been traced to the Munda languages by linguists. Although there are many Munda pockets in Chhotanagpur plateau, the remnants of Munda culture in the Indo-Aryan culture are fairly strong. Many Dravidian terms too are to be found in the Indo-Aryan languages. It is held that changes in the phonetics and vocabulary of the Vedic language can be explained as much on the basis of the Dravidian influence as that of the Munda.

India has since ancient times been a land of several religions. Ancient India saw the birth of Brahmanism or Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, but all these cultures and religions intermingled and interacted. Thus, though Indians speak different languages, practise different religions, and observe different social customs, they follow certain common styles of life. Our country shows a deep underlying unity despite great diversity.

The ancients strove for unity. The Indian subcontinent was geographically well defined and its geographical unity was supplemented by cultural integration. Though there existed many states, languages, cultures, and communities, gradually people developed territorial identity. The states or territorial units, called *janapadas*, were named after different tribes. However, the country as a whole came to be named Aryavarta after the dominant cultural community called the Aryans. Aryavarta denoted northern and central India and extended from the eastern to the western sea coasts. The other name by which India was better known was Bharatavarsha or the land of the Bharatas. Bharata, in the sense of tribe or family, figures in the *Rig Veda* and *Mahabharata*, but the name Bharatavarsha occurs in the *Mahabharata* and post-Gupta Sanskrit texts. This name was applied to one of the nine divisions of the earth, and in the post-

Gupta period it denoted India. The term Bharati or an inhabitant of India occurs in post-Gupta texts.

Iranian inscriptions are important for the origin of the term Hindu. The term Hindu occurs in the inscriptions of fifth–sixth centuries BC. It is derived from the Sanskrit term Sindhu. Linguistically s becomes h in Iranian. The Iranian inscriptions first mention Hindu as a district on the Indus. Therefore, in the earliest stage, the term Hindu means a territorial unit. It neither indicates a religion nor a community.

Our ancient poets, philosophers, and writers viewed the country as an integral unit. They spoke of the land stretching from the Himalayas to the sea as the proper domain of a single, universal monarch. The kings who tried to establish their authority from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin and from the valley of the Brahmaputra in the east to the land beyond the Indus in the west were universally praised. They were called Chakravartis. This form of political unity was attained at least twice in ancient times. In the third century BC Ashoka extended his empire over the whole of India barring the extreme south. His inscriptions are scattered across a major part of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, and even in Afghanistan. Again, in the fourth century AD, Samudragupta carried his victorious arms from the Ganga to the borders of the Tamil land. In the seventh century, the Chalukya king, Pulakeshin defeated Harshavardhana who was called the lord of the whole of north India. Despite the lack of political unity, political formations all over India assumed more or less a single form. The idea that India constituted one single geographical unit persisted in the minds of the conquerors and cultural leaders. The unity of India was also recognized by foreigners. They first came into contact with the people living on the Sindhu or the Indus, and so they named the entire country after this river. The word Hind or Hindu is derived from the Sanskrit term Sindhu, and on the same basis, the country became known as ‘India’ which is very close to the Greek term for it. India came to be called ‘Hind’ in the Persian and Arabic languages. In post-Kushan times, the Iranian rulers conquered the Sindh area and named it Hindustan.

We find continuing efforts to establish linguistic and cultural unity in India. In the third century BC Prakrit served as the lingua franca across the major part of India. Ashoka’s inscriptions were inscribed in the Prakrit language mainly in Brahmi script. Later, Sanskrit acquired the same position and served as the state language in the remotest parts of India. This process was conspicuous during the Gupta period in the fourth century. Although India witnessed the rise of numerous small states during the post-Gupta period, the official documents were written in Sanskrit.

Another notable fact is that the ancient epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were studied with the same zeal and devotion in the land of the Tamils as in the intellectual circles of Banaras and Taxila. Originally composed in Sanskrit, various versions of these epics were produced in different local languages. However, whatever the form in which Indian cultural values and ideas were expressed, the substance remained largely the same throughout India.

Indian history is especially worthy of our attention because of a peculiar type of social system which developed in India. In north India, the varna/caste system developed which eventually spread throughout the country, and influenced even the Christians and the Muslims. Even converts to Christianity and Islam continued to follow some of their old caste practices of Hinduism.

The Relevance of the Past to the Present

The study of India's past assumes special significance in the context of the problems we currently face. Some people clamour for the restoration of ancient culture and civilization, and a substantial number are sentimentally swayed by what they consider to be the past glories of India. This is different from a concern for the preservation of ancient heritage in art and architecture. What they really want to bring back is the old pattern of society and culture. This demands a clear and correct understanding of the past. There is no doubt that Indians of old made remarkable progress in a variety of fields, but these advances alone cannot enable us to compete with the achievements of modern science and technology. We cannot ignore the fact that ancient Indian society was marked by gross social injustice. The lower orders, particularly the shudras and untouchables, were encumbered with disabilities which are shocking to the modern mind. Similarly, law and custom discriminate against women in favour of men. The restoration of the old way of life will naturally revive and strengthen all these inequities. The success of the ancients in surmounting the difficulties presented by nature and human factors can build our hope and confidence in the future but any attempt to bring back the past will mean a perpetuation of the social inequity that afflicted India. All this makes it essential for us to understand what the past means.

We have many survivals of ancient, medieval, and later times persisting in the present. The old norms, values, social customs, and ritualistic practices are so deeply ingrained in the minds of the people that they cannot easily themselves get rid of them. Unfortunately, these survivals inhibit the development of the

individual and the country, and were deliberately fostered in colonial times. India cannot develop rapidly unless such vestiges of the past are eradicated from its society. The caste system and sectarianism hinder the democratic integration and development of India. Caste barriers and prejudices do not allow even educated individuals to appreciate the dignity of manual labour and hamper our unification for a common cause. Though women have been enfranchised, their age-old social subordination prevents them from playing their due role in society, and this is true too of the lower orders of society. Studying the ancient past helps us to deeply examine the roots of these prejudices and discover the causes that sustain the caste system, subordinate women, and promote narrow religious sectarianism. The study of ancient Indian history is, therefore, relevant not only to those who want to understand the true nature of the past but also to those who seek to understand the nature of the obstacles that hamper India's progress as a nation.

Chronology

1500–500 BC	Dravidian and non-Sanskritic terms found in Vedic texts.
300 BC–AD 600	Sangam literature.
3 C BC	Prakrit as the lingua franca.
AD 4 C onwards	Sanskrit as the state language.