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Sources for the History of Modern India

An abundance of historical material is available for studying India from the mid-18th century to the mid-20th century. In constructing the history of modern India, priority needs to be given to archives. **Archives** refer to a collection of historical records and documents, usually primary source documents, i.e., those documents that have been created as a necessary part of some activity—administrative, legal, social or commercial. They are unique/original documents, not consciously written or created to convey information to a future generation. An important part of archives relating to modern India are the official records, i.e., the papers of government agencies at various levels.

The records of the East India Company provide a detailed account of trading conditions during the period 1600-1857. When the British crown took over the administration, it also kept a large variety and volume of official records. These records help historians to trace every important development stage-by-stage and follow the processes of decision-making and the psychology of the policy-makers. The records of the other European East India companies (the Portuguese, Dutch and French) are also useful for constructing the history of the 17th and 18th centuries. They are primarily important from the point of view of economic history, but much can be gathered from them about the political set-up as well.

There are also many contemporary and semi-contemporary works such as memoirs, biographies and travel accounts which give us interesting as well as useful glimpses into the history of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Newspapers and journals made their appearance in the later part of the 18th century, and they provide very valuable information on almost all aspects of the Indian society in the 19th and 20th centuries. Other sources of modern Indian history include oral evidence, creative literature and paintings.

Archival Materials

There are four categories of official records (i) central government archives, (ii) state government archives, (iii) records of intermediate and subordinate authorities, and (iv) judicial records. Apart from these, there are private archives and archival sources available abroad.

Central Government Archives

The National Archives of India, located in New Delhi, contains most of the archives of the Government of India. These provide authentic and reliable source materials on varied aspects of modern Indian history. The records with the National Archives come under various groups, representing different branches of the secretariat at different stages of its development. This happened as the work of the East India Company was distributed among various branches—public or general, revenue, political, military, secret, commercial, judicial, education, etc.—and a separate set of records was kept for each of these branches or departments. With the appointment of James Rennell as the first Surveyor General of Bengal in 1767, the Survey of India began to scientifically map the unknown regions of the country and its bordering lands. The records of the Survey of India as well as the journals and memoirs of the surveyors provide valuable information not only on geographical matters but also on

contemporary socio-economic conditions and other important historical aspects.

The proceedings of the public, judicial and legislative departments provide ample data for studying the social and religious policies of the colonial government. The government's policies on education and the growth of the education system during the colonial rule are mentioned in the educational records of the central archives. The papers bearing on the emergence of the nationalist movement were part of the public series of the home department records but, in 1907, a new series of records—Home Political—was started to deal exclusively with political and communal issues. The records of the Reforms Office are very useful for an analytical study of the constitutional developments from 1920 to 1937.

■ Archives of the State Governments

The source material in the state archives comprise the records of (i) the former British Indian provinces, (ii) the erstwhile princely states which were incorporated in the Indian Union after 1947, and (iii) the foreign administrations other than those of the British. Apart from these, the records of those Indian powers which were taken over by the British, for instance, the archives of the Kingdom of Lahore (popularly known as *Khalsa Darbar* records from 1800 to 1849), are important source material. Another important collection of the pre-British public archives in India is the *Peshwa Daftar* housed in the Alienation Office, Pune. It forms the most valuable single source for the study of Maratha history for a period of almost a century before the fall of the Peshwas.

For studying the history of the princely states of Rajasthan, viz., Jaipur, Bikaner, Jodhpur, Udaipur, etc., the archives of these states, now housed in the Rajasthan State Archives at Bikaner, are valuable. Similarly, the history of Dogra rule from 1846 in Jammu and Kashmir can be studied in the valuable collection of state papers housed at Jammu. The other significant archives of the princely states are those

of Gwalior, Indore, Bhopal and Rewa, all in Madhya Pradesh, Travancore and Cochin in Kerala, Mysore in Karnataka and Kolhapur in Maharashtra.

■ **Archives of Three Presidencies**

The early records of Fort Williams (Bengal Presidency) were lost during the sack of Calcutta in 1756, but the archives of the Bengal presidency after the British victory at Plassey have survived more or less in a complete series, which are partly available in the National Archives of India and partly in the State Archives of West Bengal. The records of the Madras Presidency begin from AD 1670 and include records of the Governor and Council of Fort St. George. In these records there is plenty of information bearing on the rise of the English East India Company as a political power in the south and in the Deccan, including the Anglo-French struggle and the English conflicts with other Indian powers. The archives of Bombay Presidency, housed in the Maharashtra Secretariat Record Office, Mumbai, are extremely useful in studying the history of Western India—Maharashtra, Gujarat, Sindh and the Kannada-speaking districts of the erstwhile Bombay Presidency which were incorporated in Mysore in 1956.

■ **Archives of Other European Powers**

The archives related to the Portuguese preserved in Goa, mainly belonging to the period from 1700 to 1900, are valuable for the history of Portuguese possessions in India. The orders and dispatches from Lisbon received in Goa and the responses and reports dispatched from India to Portugal constitute the most significant historical material among the Portuguese archives. The Dutch records of Cochin and Malabar are in the Madras Record Office and those of Chinsura in the state archives of West Bengal. The French archives of Chandernagore and Pondicherry (now Puducherry) were taken to Paris by the French authorities before they relinquished these settlements. The archives of the Danish

possessions were also transferred to Copenhagen when the Dutch sold Tranquebar and Serampore to the English East India Company in 1845. The remaining Danish records, mainly relating to Tranquebar (1777-1845), are now housed in the Madras Record Office.

■ **Judicial Records**

Housed in the Madras Record Office, the archives of the Mayor's Court at Fort St. George, beginning from AD 1689, are the earliest available judicial archives. The pre-Plassey records of the Mayor's Court at Fort Williams have been lost, but those for the years 1757-73 are kept in the record room of the Calcutta High Court, along with the archives of the Supreme Court of Bengal (1774-1861). Similarly, the records of the Mayor's Court at Bombay established in 1728 are available in the Maharashtra Secretariat Record Office which also has the custody of the archives of the Bombay Recorder's Court and the Supreme Court. Apart from containing the proceedings and minutes, this category of records contains copies of wills, probates, and letters of administration which are useful for genealogical studies and for investigations pertaining to the state of society and economic conditions in the respective regions.

■ **Published Archives**

The most significant archival publications are the Parliamentary Papers which include many excerpts from the records of the East India Company and the Government of India under the Crown. The reports of the parliamentary select committees; various royal commissions constituted on specific subjects like education, civil reforms and famines, and the parliamentary debates on the Indian empire are indispensable. The proceedings of the Indian and provincial legislatures, the weekly gazettes published by the central and the provincial governments and collections of laws and regulations issued from time to time also serve as useful source material for historical research.

■ **Private Archives**

Private archives comprise papers and documents of individuals and families of note, who played a significant role in the development of modern India. The papers of eminent leaders of the nationalist movement and the records of organisations like the Indian National Congress are housed in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. The archives of banks, business houses and chambers of commerce are extremely helpful in the study of economic changes.

■ **Foreign Repositories**

A vast body of historical material related to the history of modern India is available in the repositories of erstwhile imperialist powers, who ruled in different parts of the Indian subcontinent, as well as in some other countries too. In England, the India Office Records, London and the records kept in the British Museum are very valuable. The India Office Records possesses various important documents: the minutes of the Courts of Directors and the General Court of the East India Company and various committees constituted from time to time; the minutes and correspondence of the Board of Control or the Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India; and the records of the Secretary of State and the India Council. The British Museum possesses collections of papers of British viceroys, secretaries of states and other high ranked civil and military officials who were posted in India. The archives of the missionary societies, for instance, of the Church Missionary Society of London, provide insight into the educational and social development in pre-independent India.

The Archives Nationale, Paris, and the Archives of the French Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Colonies and War, have records that throw light on the history of French possessions as well as other socio-political conditions. The records of the Dutch East India Company is available in

Rijksarchief, The Hague, and that of the Danish and Portuguese are kept in Copenhagen and Lisbon, respectively.

Apart from the archives of the European nations, the archives preserved in Pakistan are of utmost importance. The West Pakistan Record Office, Lahore, Record Office, Peshawar, records available in Sind, etc., give information about the regional history of the Indian subcontinent besides shedding light on India's relations with Afghanistan, Iran and other neighbouring countries in the colonial era.

Biographies, Memoirs and Travel Accounts

Many travellers, traders, missionaries and civil servants who came to India, have left accounts of their experiences and their impressions of various parts of India. An important group among these writers was that of the missionaries who wrote to encourage their respective societies to send more missionaries to India for the purpose of evangelising its inhabitants. In this genre, Bishop Heber's *Journal* and Abbe Dubois's *Hindu Manners and Customs*, provide useful information on the socio-economic life of India during the period of decline of the Indian powers and the rise of the British.

Some of the famous British travellers who wrote travel accounts were—George Forster, Benjamin Heyne, James Burnes (*Narrative of a Visit to the Court of Sinde*), Alexander Burnes (*Travels Into Bokhara*), C.J.C. Davidson (*Diary of the Travels and Adventures in Upper India*), and John Butler (*Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam*). Famous non-British travellers who wrote about India include Victor Jacquemont (*Letters from India describing a journey in the British Dominions of India, Tibet, Lahore and Cashmere during the years 1828-1829—1831*), Baron Charles (*Travels in Kashmir and the Punjab*), and William

Moorcroft. These travel accounts are indispensable and generally reliable sources for constructing the history of modern India, especially as they supplement the official papers.

Newspapers and Journals

Newspapers and journals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, published in English as well as in the different vernacular languages, form an important and authentic source of information for the construction of the history of modern India. The first attempts to publish newspapers in India were made by the disgruntled employees of the English East India Company who sought to expose the malpractices of private trade. For instance, in 1776, William Bolts, being censured by the Court of Directors for private trading, resigned from the Company and announced his intention to publish a newspaper. The official response to Bolts' scheme was strong and his plan ended before materialising. In 1780, James Augustus Hickey published the first newspaper in India entitled *The Bengal Gazette* or *Calcutta General Advertiser*. Hickey's press was seized within two years, owing to his outspoken criticism of government officials. Afterwards, many publications appeared such as *The Calcutta Gazette* (1784), *The Madras Courier* (1788) and *The Bombay Herald* (1789). The newspapers and journals of the early period primarily aimed at catering to the intellectual entertainment of the Europeans and Anglo-Indians.

From the second half of the 19th century, many powerful newspapers appeared, edited/published by distinguished and fearless journalists. Interestingly, nearly one-third of the founding fathers of the Indian National Congress in 1885 were journalists. Some of their publications were: *The Hindu* and *Swadesamitran* under the editorship of G. Subramaniya Iyer, *Kesari* and *Mahratta* under Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *Bengalee* under Surendranath Banerjea,

Amrita Bazaar Patrika under Sisir Kumar Ghosh and Motilal Ghosh, *Sudharak* under Gopal Krishna Gokhale, *Indian Mirror* under N.N. Sen, *Voice of India* under Dadabhai Naoroji, *Hindustan* and *Advocate* under G.P. Varma. The *Tribune* and *Akhbar-i-Am* in Punjab, *Indu Prakash*, *Dnyan Prakash*, *Kal* and *Gujarati* in Bombay, and *Som Prakash Banganivasi* and *Sadharani* in Bengal were other noted newspapers of the time. Indian nationalists and revolutionaries living abroad published newspapers and journals—*Indian Sociologist* (London, Shyamji Krishnavarma), *Bande Matram* (Paris, Madam Cama), *Talwar* (Berlin, Virendranath Chattopadhyay), and *Ghadar* (San Francisco, Lala Hardayal)—to infuse a feeling of nationalism among Indians living abroad.

Newspapers depict almost all aspects of life in colonial India from around the 1870s onwards. From the 1920s onwards, newspapers tracked the major events during the freedom struggle. However, newspaper accounts cannot be seen as unprejudiced or completely objective. The accounts that were published in a newspaper in London by the pro-British Raj people were bound to be different from the report in an Indian nationalist paper.

Oral Evidence

Oral history refers to the construction of history with the help of non-written sources, for instance, personal reminiscence. Oral sources allow historians to broaden the boundaries of their discipline and corroborate their findings from other sources of history. However, many historians remain sceptical of oral history.

Creative Literature

The most significant outcome of the Indo-European contact was the novel which emerged in the latter half of the 19th century. The first important writer of that period was the

famous Bengali novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-94). His novels are mostly historical, the best known among them being *Anand Math* (1882), especially for its powerful lyric 'Vandemataram' and depiction of the Sanyasi Revolt (1760s). His last novel *Rajasimha* can be called the grand finale to his remarkable career. Icharam Suryaram Desai (1853-1912) was a fine scholar of medieval Gujarati literary history. His first novel *Hind ane Britanica* was one of the earliest Indian novels with political overtones. Tamil writers like Girija Devi and Ramatirtha Thammal, who wrote *Mohanra Rajani* (1931) and *Dasikalin Mosa Valai* (1936) respectively, also made the novel an effective vehicle of social experience. G.V. Krishna Rao's *Kilubommalu* (The Puppets, 1956) in Telugu was concerned with the moral aspects and behaviour of the rural people. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1910-1994) was one of the eminent writers in Malayalam whose famous novel *Balyakala Sakhi* (The Childhood Friends, 1944) was a tragic tale of love. Similarly, Thakazhi Siva Sankara Pillai became prominent for his two extremely well written works in Malayalam, *Tottiyude Makan* (Son of a Scavenger, 1948) and *Chemmin* (Shrimps, 1956). Despite having different educational backgrounds and social outlooks, all these writers shared a strong sense of realism and deep interest in the life of the marginalised and oppressed sections of the society. These novels give a picture of the social milieu of the days they relate to.

Painting

Some information on the socio-economic, political and cultural life during the colonial period can be obtained from the paintings of that period. The Company Paintings, also referred as 'Patna Kalam' emerged under the patronage of the East India Company. They picturise the people and scenes as they existed at the time. Trades, festivals, dances and the attire of people were visible in these works. Company

paintings continued to be popular throughout the 19th century until the introduction of photography in India in the 1840s.

The pictorial images produced by the British and Indians—paintings, pencil drawings, etchings, posters, cartoons and bazaar prints—are especially important records of the great revolt of 1857. The British pictures offer images that were meant to provoke a range of different emotions and reactions. Some of them commemorate the British heroes who saved the English and repressed the rebels. *Relief of Lucknow*, painted by Thomas Jones Barker in 1859, is one such example. Another painting of this period, *In Memoriam* by Joseph Noel Paton, recorded in painting two years of the revolt of 1857. One can see English women and children huddled in a circle, looking helpless and innocent, seemingly waiting for the inevitable—dishonour, violence and death. These paintings of the mutiny period are important for the historian to interpret and understand the worldviews of the British and the Indians regarding this major event.

Kalighat painting that came to the fore in Calcutta in the nineteenth century depicted not only mythological figures but also ordinary people engaged in their everyday life. These latter pictures captured the social changes taking place in the Calcutta of the time. These paintings made a comment on social evils of the time; some of these paintings satirised certain modes adopted by the people of the time.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, a new art movement emerged which received its primary stimulus from the growing nationalism in India. Artists like Nandalal Bose and Raja Ravi Varma were representatives of this new trend. In the rise of the Bengal School led by Abanindranath Tagore (nephew of Rabindranath Tagore), E.B. Havell (who joined the art school in Calcutta as principal) and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (son of an important Tamil political leader in Sri Lanka) played a vital role. Though many of the paintings of this new trend primarily focused on themes of Indian

mythology and cultural heritage, they are important sources for studying the modern art movement in India and for the art historians.

Summary

Sources of Modern Indian History

Archival Materials consist of public, private and foreign repositories

Public Archives include the archives of the Governments of India, archives of state governments, archives of the three Presidencies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay, and judicial records.

Private Archives Papers and documents of individuals and families of note who played a significant role in the development of modern India.

Foreign Repositories Indian office Records in London, Record Office, Lahore, etc.

Biographies and Memoirs Accounts of travelers, traders, missionaries and civil servants during the 18th and 19th centuries as well as memoirs written by Indian leaders during Independence movement.

Newspapers and Journals Published in India as well as abroad.

Others Oral tradition, creative literature, painting.