

Modern Historians of Ancient India

Colonialist Views and their Contribution

Although educated Indians retained their traditional history in the form of handwritten epics, Puranas, and semi-biographical works, modern research in the history of ancient India began only in the second half of the eighteenth century to serve the needs of the British colonial administration. When Bengal and Bihar fell under the rule of the East India Company in 1765, they found it difficult to administer the Hindu law of inheritance. Therefore, in 1776, the *Manu Smriti*, (the law-book of Manu), which was considered authoritative, was translated into English as *A Code of Gentoo Laws*. Pandits were associated with British judges to administer Hindu civil law and *maulvis* to administer that of Muslims. The initial efforts to understand ancient laws and customs, which continued largely until the eighteenth century, culminated in the establishment in Calcutta in 1784 of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. It was set up by a civil servant of the East India Company, Sir William Jones (1746–94). He was the first to suggest that Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek belonged to the same family of languages. He also translated the play known as the *Abhijnanashakuntalam* into English in 1789; the *Bhagavadgita*, the most popular Hindu religious text was translated into English by Wilkins in 1785. The Bombay Asiatic Society was set up in 1804, and the Asiatic Society of Great Britain was set up in London in 1823. William Jones emphasized that originally the European languages were very similar to Sanskrit and the Iranian language. This enthused European countries such as Germany, France, and Russia, to foster Indological studies. During the first half of the nineteenth century, chairs in Sanskrit were established in the UK and several other European countries.

The greatest impetus to Indological studies was given by the Germanborn scholar F. Max Mueller (1823–1902), who was largely based in England. The Revolt of 1857 caused Britain to realize that it badly needed a deeper knowledge of the manners and social systems of an alien people over whom it ruled. Similarly, the Christian missionaries sought to uncover the vulnerabilities in the Hindu religion to win converts and strengthen the British empire. To meet these needs, ancient scriptures were translated on a massive scale under the editorship of Max Mueller. Altogether fifty volumes, some in several parts, were published under the Sacred Books of the East series. Although a few Chinese and Iranian texts were included, ancient Indian texts were predominant.

In the introductions to these volumes and the books based on them, Max Mueller and other Western scholars made certain generalizations about the nature of ancient Indian history and society. They stated that the ancient Indians lacked a sense of history, especially of the element of time and chronology. They added that Indians were accustomed to despotic rule, and also natives were so engrossed in the problems of spiritualism or of the next world that they felt no concern about the problems of this world. The Western scholars stressed that Indians had experienced neither a sense of nationhood nor any form of self-government.

Many of these generalizations were made in the *Early History of India* by Vincent Arthur Smith (1843–1920), who wrote in 1904 the first systematic history of ancient India. His book, which was based on an in-depth study of the available sources gave primacy to political history. It served as a textbook for nearly fifty years and is still used by scholars. Smith's approach to history was pro-imperialist. As a loyal member of the Indian Civil Service, he emphasized the role of foreigners in ancient India.

Alexander's invasion accounted for almost one-third of his book. India was presented as a land of despotism which had not experienced political unity until the establishment of British rule. He observes: 'Autocracy is substantially the only form of government with which the historian of India is concerned'. In sum, British interpretations of Indian history served to denigrate the Indian character and achievements, and justify colonial rule. A few of these observations appeared to have some validity. Thus, in comparison to the Chinese, Indians did not show any strong sense of chronology although in the earlier stage, important events were dated with reference to the death of Gautama Buddha. However, generalizations made by colonialist historians were by and large either false or grossly exaggerated, but served as good propaganda material for the perpetuation of the despotic British rule. Their emphasis on the Indian

tradition of one-man rule could justify the system which vested all powers in the hands of the viceroy. Similarly, if Indians were obsessed with the problems of the next world, the British colonial masters had no option but to look after their life in this world. Without any experience of self-rule in the past, how could the natives manage their affairs in the present? At the heart of all such generalizations lay the need to demonstrate that Indians were incapable of governing themselves.

Nationalist Approach and its Contribution

All this naturally came as a great challenge to Indian scholars, particularly to those who had received Western education. They were upset by the colonialist distortions of their past history and at the same time distressed by the contrast between the decaying feudal society of India and the progressive capitalist society of Britain. A band of scholars took upon themselves not only the mission to reform Indian society, but also to reconstruct ancient Indian history in such a way as to make a case for social reforms and, more importantly, for self-government. In doing so, most historians were guided by the nationalist ideas of Hindu revivalism, but there was no dearth of scholars who adopted a rationalist and objective approach. To the second category belongs Rajendra Lal Mitra (1822–91), who published some Vedic texts and wrote a book entitled *Indo-Aryans*. A great lover of ancient heritage, he took a rational view of ancient society and produced a forceful tract to show that in ancient times people ate beef. Others sought to prove that in spite of its peculiarities, the caste system was not basically different from the class system based on division of labour found in Europe's pre-industrial and ancient societies.

In Maharashtra, Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837–1925) and Vishwanath Kashinath Rajwade (1869–1926) emerged as two great dedicated scholars who pieced together varied sources to reconstruct the social and political history of India. R.G. Bhandarkar reconstructed the political history of the Satavahanas of the Deccan and the history of Vaishnavism and other sects. A great social reformer, through his researches he advocated widow remarriage and castigated the evils of the caste system and child marriage. With his unadulterated passion for research, V.K. Rajwade journeyed from village to village in Maharashtra in search of Sanskrit manuscripts and sources of Maratha history; the sources were eventually published in twenty-two volumes. He did not write much, but the history of the institution of marriage that he wrote in Marathi in 1926 will continue to be a classic because of its solid base in Vedic

and other texts, and also because of the author's insight into the stages in the evolution of marriage in India. Pandurang Vaman Kane (1880–1972), a great Sanskritist wedded to social reform, continued the earlier tradition of scholarship. His monumental work entitled the *History of the Dharmasastra*, published in five volumes in the twentieth century, is an encyclopaedia of ancient social laws and customs. That enables us to study the social processes in ancient India.

The Indian scholars diligently studied polity and political history to demonstrate that India did have a political history and that the Indians possessed expertise in administration. Here due credit should be given to Devdatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar (1875–1950), an epigraphist, who published books on Ashoka and on ancient Indian political institutions. More valuable work was done by Hemachandra Raychaudhuri (1892–1957), who reconstructed the history of ancient India from the time of the Bharata (Mahabharata) war, that is, tenth century BC to the end of the Gupta empire. As a teacher of European history, he adopted some of the methods and comparative insights in writing this book. Although he did not discuss the problem of periodization, his history of ancient India stopped with the sixth century AD. Though he recognized the contribution of V.A. Smith to the reconstruction of early Indian history, yet Raychaudhuri criticized the British scholar at many points. His writings are marked by impeccable scholarship but show a streak of militant Brahmanism when he criticizes Ashoka's policy of peace. A stronger element of Hindu revivalism appears in the writings of R.C. Majumdar (1888–1980), who was a prolific writer and the general editor of the multi-volume publication *History and Culture of the Indian People*.

Most writers on early Indian history did not give adequate attention to south India. Even K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1892–1975), the great historian from south India, followed the same approach in his *A History of Ancient India*, but this was more than rectified in his *A History of South India*. His style is terse but his writing lucid. In the presentation of facts he is as dependable as Raychaudhuri. However, his general observations on the nature of polity and society in south India are questioned by several scholars. Nilakanta Sastri emphasized the cultural supremacy of the brahmanas and also highlighted the harmony that prevailed in early Indian society. Under his leadership several research monographs were produced on the dynastic history of south India.

Until 1960, political history attracted the largest number of Indian scholars, who also glorified the histories of their respective regions on dynastic lines. Those who wrote history at a pan-India level were inspired by the ideas of

nationalism. In contrast to the book of V.A. Smith, who devoted almost a third of the total space to Alexander's invasion, Indian scholars gave this subject much less importance. On the other hand, they stressed the importance of the dialogue of Porus with Alexander and Chandragupta Maurya's liberation of north-western India from Seleucus. Some scholars, such as K.P. Jayaswal (1881–1937) and A.S. Altekar (1898–1959), overplayed the role of the indigenous ruling dynasties in liberating India from the rule of the Shakas and Kushans, little realizing that Central Asians and others became an intrinsic part of India's life and did not exploit Indian resources for their original homeland.

However, the greatest merit of K.P. Jayaswal lay in exploding the myth of Indian despotism. As early as 1910–12, he wrote several articles to show that republics existed in ancient times and enjoyed a measure of self-government. His findings finally appeared in *Hindu Polity* in 1924. Although Jayaswal is charged with projecting modern nationalist ideas into ancient institutions, and the nature of the republican government presented by him is attacked by many writers including U.N. Ghoshal (1886–1969), his basic thesis regarding the practice of the republican experiment is widely accepted, and his pioneer work *Hindu Polity*, now in its sixth edition, is considered a classic.

Move Towards Non-Political History

British historian, A.L. Basham (1914–86), a Sanskritist by training, questioned the wisdom of looking at ancient India from the modern point of view. His earlier writings show his deep interest in the materialist philosophy of some heterodox sects. Later he believed that the past should be read out of curiosity and pleasure. His book, *The Wonder That Was India* (1951), is a sympathetic survey of the various facets of ancient Indian culture and civilization free from the prejudices that plague the writings of V.A. Smith and many other British writers.

Basham's book marks a great shift from political to non-political history. The same shift is evident in D.D. Kosambi's (1907–66) book, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1957), later popularized in *The Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (1965). Kosambi blazed a new trail in Indian history. His treatment follows a materialist interpretation of history, which is derived from the writings of Karl Marx. He presents the history of ancient Indian society, economy, and culture as an integral part of the development of the forces and relations of production. His was the first survey volume to show the stages of

social and economic development in terms of tribal and class processes. He was criticized by many scholars, including Basham, but his book continues to be widely read.

Over the past forty years there has been a sea change in the methods and orientation of those who work on ancient India. They lay greater stress on social, economic, and cultural processes, and try to relate them to political developments. They take account of the stratification of the texts and compare their conventional nature with archaeological and anthropological evidence. All this bodes well for the future of historical studies. Western writers no longer insist that all cultural elements came to India from outside. Some of them, however, hold that religious ideas, rituals, caste, kinship, and tradition are the central forces in Indian history. They also underscore various divisive features which made for stagnation, and are more concerned about the problem of stability and continuity. They seem to be fascinated by old, exotic elements and want to preserve them forever. Such an approach implies that Indian society has not changed and cannot be changed; that stagnation is an integral part of the Indian character. Thus, the chauvinists and sophisticated colonialists use the study of India's past to prevent its progress. A few Indian writers magnify the role of religion, and believe that everything good and great originated in their country.

Communal Approach

Since 1980 some Indian writers and their Western counterparts have adopted an aggressive and irrational approach to the study of ancient India. They identify it with Hinduism. Under British rule, colonialist historians deliberately denigrated India's achievements and attributed important elements of Indian culture to external influence. Indian historians underlined India's contribution to world culture. Hence, in the interpretation of history, there was a continuing struggle between colonialism and nationalism. Now the situation has undergone a change. The struggle now is between communalism and irrationalism, on the one hand, and rationalism and professionalism, on the other. Though most writers are rational and professional, some have become communal and irrational. The latter overplay myths and legends, arguing for the existence of Rama's Ayodhya without historical evidence. They censure all critical studies of the brahmanical social structure and even support the caste system by ignoring the social inequity stressed by Manu.

Those who once attributed the Painted Grey Ware to the Vedic people and looked for it outside India now declare the Indo-Aryans to be indigenous Indians. They argue that the Muslims and Christians who came from outside are foreigners. Such generalizations need to be dispassionately examined on the basis of a rational reading of the sources. In the context of religion, neither Hindu nor Hindu dharma is known to any ancient Sanskrit text nor to any other ancient source. The communal writers go on harping on Hindu and Hindutva. Under the circumstances, historians wedded to objective and scientific criteria have to be alert and adhere to reason and long established historical standards.

Chronology

(AD)

Second half of the eighteenth century	Modern research in the history of ancient India.
1765	Bihar and Bengal came under the rule of the East India Company.
1776	<i>Manusmriti</i> tr. as <i>Code of Gentoo Laws</i> .
1784	Asiatic Society of Bengal founded in Calcutta.
1785	<i>Bhagavadgita</i> tr. into English.
1804	Bombay Asiatic Society founded.
1823	Asiatic Society of Great Britain set up in London.
First half of the 19 C	Chairs in Sanskrit established in England and several other European countries.
1904	<i>Early History of India</i> by V.A. Smith.
1924	<i>Hindu Polity</i> by K.P. Jayaswal.
1926	<i>The History of the Institution of Marriage</i> (in Marathi) by V.K. Rajwade.
1951	<i>The Wonder That Was India</i> by A.L. Basham.
1957	<i>An Introduction to the Study of Indian History</i> by D.D. Kosambi.
1965	<i>The Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline</i> by D.D. Kosambi.
1837–1925	R.G. Bhandarkar.
1869–1926	V.K. Rajawade.

1875–1950	D.R. Bhandarkar.
1880–1972	P.V. Kane.
1881–1937	K.P. Jayaswal.
1886–1969	U.N. Ghoshal.
1888–1980	R.C. Majumdar.
1892–1957	H.C. Raychaudhuri.
1892–1975	K.A. Nilakanta Sastri.
1898–1959	A.S. Altekar.
1907–66	D.D. Kosambi.
1914–86	A.L. Basham.