

# Introduction to Human Sciences (HS8.102)

Spring 2022, IIIT Hyderabad  
22 Feb, Tuesday (Lecture 6)

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## Indian History

### The Vedic and Buddhist Traditions

Indian history is studied in a different way from the western tradition – its fundamental basis is the *kAlacakra* or the myth of the eternal return, and it was considered to be revealed and not rationally investigated. The oral tradition that passed it on, *Sruwi*, was authoritative but authorless; on the other hand, the written medium, *smQwi*, had known authors but were derivative and sometimes inexact. What was known as *iwiHAsa* was considered to be predestined.

The Buddhist tradition for history is different from this, however. It posits an *original state*, from which modern states and empires emerged.

Some traditions of history died out and merged with mythology, but two remained which are identifiable with modern historical studies – family genealogies and court chronicles.

### The Orientalists

The orientalist were the westerners who came to India with the aim of studying its philosophies and cultures, along with the traders. The Asiatic Society was formed in the late 18th century to this end.

The liberals and utilitarians, however, had a different perspective – they considered Indian society backward and primitive. Their contribution to the study of the history of India was its periodisation into the Hindu, Muslim and British periods.

The First War of Independence created a deep fear towards Indians and a sense of British superiority, vindicating conservative liberalism.

### Important Milestones

The decipherment of the Brahmi and Kharoshti scripts (by James Prinsep) was an important milestone in the study of history.

The Archaeological Survey of India, led by Alexander Cunningham, was the next big landmark.

This was followed by the creation of the history departments in the universities of Calcutta and Bombay, and the discoveries of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The National Archives of India were also set up.

## **Perspectives**

There were different perspectives of history – the colonialist, the nationalist, the marxist and the subaltern.

The colonial history identifies oriental despotism, and claims there is nothing originally “Indian”; it is merely a convenient geographical name. It considers British rule an agent of change, as well as unification.

Nationalist history emphasises that India had its own history and a written historical tradition. There were unifying empires and ideologies. One main focus of this perspective is to find out why India was conquered.

Marxist historians (notably D. D. Kosambi) identify the economic and social foundations of Indian history, rather than political. They focus on the class struggle and the role of the common people. The freedom struggle itself was not just against the British - it was against the Indian oppressors as well.

Subaltern studies are similar to Marxist studies in that they rely on the elite-subaltern divide, but carry it further. They focus on reading sources “against the grain”, inferring from omissions what has been sought to be erased.