

## 2. Historiography : Indian Tradition

### 2.1 Tradition of Indian Historiography

### 2.2 Indian Historiography : Various Ideological Frameworks

### 2.1 Tradition of Indian Historiography

We learnt about the western tradition of historiography in the last lesson. In this lesson we will know about the tradition of Indian historiography.

**Historiography in the Ancient Period :** In the ancient period in India memories of the great deeds of ancestors and mythological lore, also memories of social transitions were preserved with the help of oral recitals.

The inscriptions on the Harappan seals and other artefacts confirm that Indians had mastered the art of writing as early as the third millennium B.C.E. or perhaps before that. However, the Harappan script is not yet successfully deciphered.

The earliest known written documents of historical nature found in India are in the form of inscriptions. They are dated to the 3rd century B.C.E., that is emperor Ashok Maurya's times. His edicts are inscribed on natural rocks and stone pillars.

From the 1st century C.E. inscriptions begin to occur on coins, metal images and sculptures, and also on copper plates. They provide important historical information. We get to know about the dates of various kings, dynastic genealogies, territorial extent and

### You would like to know this:



**Sohagaura Copper-plate :** The copper-plate was found at Sohagaura (District Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh). It is supposed to be from the Mauryan period. The inscription on it is in Brahmi script. The symbols known as 'Tree-in-railing' and 'Mountain' at the beginning of the inscription also occur on punch marked coins. Another symbol which looks like a structure erected on four pillars is supposed to be indicative of a granary. The inscription records a royal order that the grains stored in the granary should be distributed carefully. It is supposed to be suggestive of precautions taken in the times of a famine.

administration of various empires and kingdoms and also important political events, social organisation, climate, famines, etc. of the respective times.

The ancient Indian literature including the epics Ramayana and Mahabharat, Puranas, Jain and Buddhist texts, historical accounts by Indian authors and also travelogues by foreign travellers are

important sources of history.

Writing of biographies of kings and dynastic histories mark an important step in the Indian historiography. 'Harshacharit', written in the 7th century C.E. by Banabhatta is King Harsha's biography. It portrays a realistic picture of the social, economic, political, religious and cultural life during the king's times.

**Historiography in the Medieval Period :** The style of writing 'Rajtarangini', the history of Kashmir by Kalhana in the 12th century C.E. is quite close to the concept of modern historiography. Kalhana himself says that he wrote this text after critically examining various sources like inscriptions, coins, remains of ancient monuments, dynastic records and local traditions.

In the medieval India the historians in the courts of Muslim rulers were influenced by Arabic and Persian historiography. Among them Ziauddin Barani holds an important place. In 'Tarikh-i-Phiruz Shahi', a book written by him, he has stated the purpose of historiography. According to him the historian's duty is not limited only to the recording of the ruler's valour and policies of welfare but he should also write about the ruler's failings and incorrect policies. Barani further says that a historian should also take into consideration the impact of the teachings of the wise, the learned, and the saints on the cultural life of people. Thus, Barani expanded the scope of historiography.

For the historians in the Mughal courts praising the emperors and exhibition of loyalty became more important. The custom of adding suitable poetic quotes and beautiful pictures was also introduced.



### Do you know ?

Alberuni wrote in Arabic about Indian knowledge and social life. In the following period many books about India were written by foreign scholars. Among them, to name a few, are : Hasan Nizami's 'Tajul-Ma'asir'; Minhaj-i-Siraj's 'Tabaqat-i-Nasiri'; various works by Amir Khusrau; 'Tuzuk-i-Timuri', the autobiography of Timur (-i) Lang, who was also known as Amir Timur who invaded India; 'Tarikh-i- Mubarakshahi' by Yahya Bin Ahmad Sirhindi. Their accounts provide us with historic information of Sultanate period.

Accounts of foreign travellers in India are also important. Among them are Ibn Battuta, Abdul Razzaq, Marco Polo, Nicolo Conti, Barbosa and Domingos Paes. Their accounts provide us with historic information of medieval India. Ishwardas Nagar, Bhimsen Saxena, Khafi Khan and Niccolao Manucci were among the historians of Aurangzeb's times whose accounts are important sources of Mughal history.

Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire wrote an autobiography, entitled, 'Tuzuk-i-Babari'. It contains the descriptions of the battles fought by him. Babur also recorded his minute observations of various regions and cities travelled by him including the local economy, customs and the flora.

Abul Fazl's 'Akbarnama' is very important from the viewpoint of critical historiography. His method of collecting authentic historical documents and their

scrutiny is looked upon as devoid of bias and hence realistic.

‘Bakhar’ is an important type of historical documents of medieval times. It contains eulogies of the heroes and stories of historic events, battles, lives of great men.

Marathi bakhars are of various types. ‘Sabhasad Bakhar’ was written by Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad during the reign of Chhatrapati Rajaram Maharaj. It is an important bakhar for getting information about the rule of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

‘Bhausahebanchi Bakhar’ describes the Battle of Panipat. Another bakhar, entitled ‘Panipatachi Bakhar’, is also about the same event. ‘Holkaranchi Kaiphiyat’ provides information about the Holkars and their contributions to the Maratha rule.

Bakhars can be divided into various types such as biographies of kings, dynastic history, descriptions of events, history of a sect, autobiographies, regarding grievance, based on mythologies and state administration by a king.

**Historiography in the Modern Period :** In the 20th century the Indian archaeological exploration and research started under the British rule. A number of ancient sites were excavated under the supervision of Sir Alexander Cunningham, the first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India. He chose mainly the sites mentioned in the Buddhist texts for this purpose. Harappan Civilisation was discovered during the tenure of Sir John Marshall. Because of this discovery the antiquity of Indian history could be traced to 3rd millennium B.C.E. or even earlier.



Alexander Cunningham



John Marshall

Many British officials in India wrote about Indian history. Their writings display strong influence of the colonial policies of the British.

Three Volumes of ‘The History of British India’, written by James Mill were published in 1817. This was the first book



James Mill

on Indian history written by a British historian. It clearly reflects an absence of objective perspective and prejudice about various aspects of the Indian culture.

‘The History of India’, written by Mountstuart Elphinstone, Governor of Bombay (now Mumbai) was published in 1841.

The period of Maratha Empire is very important in the Indian history. Grant Duff’s name stands out among the British officers who wrote about Maratha history. He wrote the book entitled, ‘A History of Mahrattas’. This book is published in three volumes. Grant Duff’s writing also shows the British inclination of condemning Indian culture and history. Similar tendency is witnessed in Colonel Todd’s writings about Rajasthan’s history. The two volumes written by William



Wilson Hunter on Indian history show a somewhat impartial treatment of the subject.

Nilkanth Janardan Kirtane and Vishwanath Kashinath Rajwade were two Indian historians who took upon the task of exposing the limitations of Grant Duff's writings.

## 2.2 Indian Historiography : Various Ideological Frameworks

**Colonial Historiography :** The early scholars who studied and wrote Indian history were mainly British officers and Christian missionaries. Their prejudice is clearly reflected in the way some of them have ridiculed Indian culture. Their writings were used to justify the colonial British rule. The five volumes of 'Cambridge History of India', published during 1922-1937 C.E. are distinct examples of colonial historiography.

**Orientalist Historiography :** Many European scholars felt curious about civilisations and countries of the East. Some of those scholars felt admiration and respect for them. These scholars were known as 'Orientalists'.

The orientalist studied the similarities between Sanskrit and some of the European languages. They focused more on Vedic tradition and Sanskrit literature. Their studies resulted into formulating the notion of an ancient language that could be the mother of all Indo-European languages.

In 1784, Sir William Jones founded Asiatic society in Kolkata. It opened the doors for research in ancient Indian literature and history.

Among the Orientalist scholars, Friedrich Max Muller deserves a special



**William Jones**

mention. In his opinion Sanskrit was the most ancient language of the Indo-European languages. He was deeply interested in Sanskrit literature. He first translated the Sanskrit text of 'Hitopadesh'. He was the editor of 50 volumes of 'The Sacred Books of the East'. He also compiled 'Rigveda', which has been published in six volumes. He translated Rigveda in German.

Lately, Edward Said, a scholar who has re-evaluated the orientalist writings, has thrown light on imperialistic interests of orientalist scholars.



**Friedrich Max Muller**

**Nationalistic Historiography :** The writings of Indian historians who were trained in the British educational system show an inclination to restore the pride in the ancient glory of India and the self-esteem of the Indian readers. Their writings are known as 'Nationalistic Historiography'. Nationalistic writings in Maharashtra were inspired by Vishnushastri Chiplunkar. He criticised the prejudiced history of ancient India written by British officers. The nationalistic historians tried to seek the golden era of Indian history. They are at times blamed for ignoring the critical analysis of the historical truth. Mahadev Govind Ranade, Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Rajendra Lal Mishra,

Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Kashi Prasad Jayswal, Radha Kumud Mukherjee, Bhagawan Lal Indraji, Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi and Anant Sadashiv Altekar are the names of some renowned scholars among the nationalistic historians.



### Do you know ?

Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade has explained the background of the rise of Maratha empire in great details in his book, 'The Rise of Maratha Power'. According to him it was not like a suddenly erupted forest fire but the ground for it in Maharashtra on the social, cultural and religious levels was getting ready over a prolonged period.

Rajwade is well-known for his writings in Marathi on varied subjects



**V.K. Rajwade**

He wrote very scholarly prefaces to each of the 22 volumes. He stated, 'History is the all-inclusive image of the past societies. It does not include only the stories of political images, conspiracies and wars for seizing power.' He insisted that history should be written only using the authentic documentary source.

The nationalistic historiography helped in the triggering of the independence



### Do you know ?

V. K. Rajwade founded 'Bharat Itihas Samshodhak Mandal' in Pune, on 7th July 1910 to facilitate historical research.

'Human history is defined by Time and Space. Describing any event necessitates that the final portrayal should be spread on the complete canvass of the given time and place.

Only if a balanced combination of the three factors, Time, Space and Personalities is present, then only an event does qualify to be called so.'

**- V. K. Rajwade**



**Vinayak D. Savarkar**

movement of the Indian people against the British. In this aspect the book, 'The Indian War of Independence, 1857', written by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar is of great importance.

The nationalistic historiography provided a momentum to the writing of regional histories too. As a result the attention of historians was drawn to the geographic conditions and history of south Indian regions.

**Historiography in the Post-Independence Era :** Now along with writing the dynastic histories, the cultural, social, economic histories were also being written. Scholars of the post-independence

era began to feel the need of writing histories of various communities, sciences, economic systems, political ideologies, cultural aspects, etc. The historiography of this era has been influenced mainly by three ideological schools: (1) Marxist History (2) Subaltern History (3) Feminist History.

**Marxist History :** The concern for the means of production, modes of production and the industrial relations were at the centre in the writings of Marxist historians. Accordingly, to analyse the impact of every social event of significance has remained the basic theme of Marxist historiography.



**Damodar Kosambi** the notable Indian historians who adopted Marxist ideological framework, scholars like Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, Comrade Shripad Amrut Dange, Ram Sharan Sharma, Comrade Sharad Patil have contributed notably. Comrade Dange was one of the founder members of the Indian Communist Party. 'Primitive Communism to Slavery', the book written by him represents Marxist historiography.

**Subaltern History :** The seeds of subaltern history are found in the Marxist historiography. The role of the Italian historian Antonio Gramsci is very important in developing the idea that history should be written starting from the bottommost ranks of people in the society. In fact, subaltern means the 'bottommost ranks'.

Folklore has been considered as a very important source of writing subaltern histories. Ranjit Guha, an Indian historian played a major role in establishing subaltern history as an important academic school of historiography. However, we may point out that much before the onset of subaltern ideology similar thoughts were expressed by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Mahatma Phule unfolded the history of the '*shudratishudra*' communities in his book, 'Gulamgiri'. He drew attention to the exploitation of women, *shudras* and *atishudras* done under the name of religion.



The terms '*shudra*' and '*atishudra*' indicates **Mahatma Jyotirao Phule** the bottommost ranks in the caste system.

The role of the people belonging to Dalit castes is very significant in the shaping of various cultural and political aspects of India. However, their role was not duly acknowledged in the colonial and nationalistic historiography. Dr Babasaheb



**Dr Ambedkar**

Ambedkar focusing on this fact, consistently wrote about it. Two of his books, 'Who Were the Shudras' and 'The Untouchables' may be cited as examples of history of subaltern type.

**Feminist History :** Over a significant period of time, mainly male scholars were involved in the writing of Indian history. As a result, the role and achievements of women in history remained neglected. To

highlight this fact was a major task faced by the feminist historians. Also, it was important to study and compile the historical writings of women. It was also necessary to rethink of women's position in history.



**Tarabai Shinde**

Among women authors writing about women in the 19th century C.E., Tarabai Shinde was the foremost one. She wrote attacking the male dominated social system and the caste system. Her book, 'Stripurush Tulana', published in 1882, is acknowledged as the first feminist book in India. In 1888, the book written by Pandita Ramabai was published, entitled, 'The High Caste Hindu Woman'.

The feminist literature of the post-independence era concentrated on the issues like employment of women, treatment meted out to them at their work place, their right to political equality, etc. Among the recently published feminist literature Meera Kosambi's book, 'Crossing Thresholds : Feminist Essays in Social History' is of importance. It contains essays on the life stories of women like Pandita Ramabai and Dr. Rukhamabai, the first practicing lady doctor of India. A lot of literature is available unfolding the viewpoint of Dalit

women in Maharashtra. Dr. Sharmila Rege's work is noteworthy in this context. Her book, 'Writing Caste, Writing Gender : Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies' includes her essays on the autobiographies of Dalit women.



### Do you know ?

Publication of 'Marathi Riyasat' by Govind Sakharam Sardesai was a momentous achievement in the field of Indian Historiography. His work became so famous that people began to address him as 'Riyasatkar'. He published several volumes of Maratha history.

There have been a number of Indian historians who wrote without embracing a particular ideology. Among them historians like Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Surendra Nath Sen, Riyasatkar G.S. Sardesai, and Tryambak Shankar Shejawalkar are noteworthy.

In the recent times historians like Yashawant Dinkar Phadke, Ramchandra Guha, etc. have contributed extensively to the historiography of modern India.

Thus, it is evident that the Indian historiography has been influenced greatly by the social and political movements. It seems that some part of the Indian historiography was also developed outside the influence of these movements.



### Exercise

#### 1. Complete the sentences by choosing a correct option.

- (1) ..... was the first Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India.

- (a) Alexander Cunningham  
(b) William Jones (c) John Marshall  
(d) Friedrich Max Muller



(2) ..... translated the Sanskrit text of 'Hitopadesh'.

- (a) James Mill
- (b) Friedrich max Muller
- (c) Mountstuart Elphinstone
- (d) Sir John Marshall

**(B) Identify the wrong pair in the following, correct it and rewrite.**

- (1) 'Who were the Shudras' – Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar
- (2) 'Stri-Purush Tulana' – Feminist writing
- (3) 'The Indian War of Independence 1857' – Marxist History
- (4) Grant Duff – Colonial History.

**2. Explain the following with its reason.**

- (1) Writing of the regional history received a momentum.
- (2) Bakhar is an important type of historical documents.

**3. Answer the following in 25-30 words.**

- (1) Which things are included in the descriptions by Emperor Babur in his autobiography ?
- (2) What is the contribution of Svatantaryaveer Savarkar to nationalistic historiography?

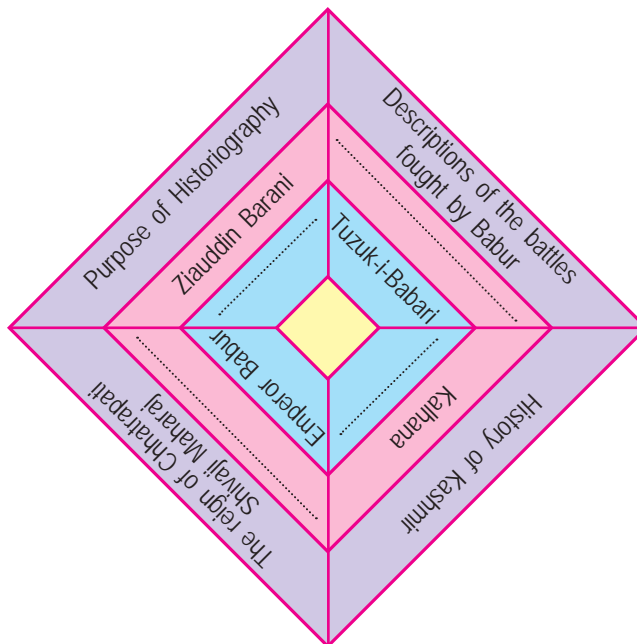
**4. Write detailed answers to the following questions :**

- (1) What is Marxist History?
- (2) What is the contribution of Itihasacharya V.K. Rajwade to historiography ?

**5. (a) Complete the following chart.**

James Mill	'The History of British India'
James Grant Duff	.....
.....	'The History of India'
S.A. Dange	.....
.....	'Who were the Shudras'

**(b) Complete the following concept chart.**



**6. Explain the following concepts.**

- (1) Orientalist historiography.
- (2) Nationalistic historiography.
- (3) Subaltern history.

### Project

Prepare an illustrated manuscript with the help of the internet giving more information about the historians mentioned in this lesson.

