

2. Modern Historians of Ancient India

Colonial Views and Contributions:

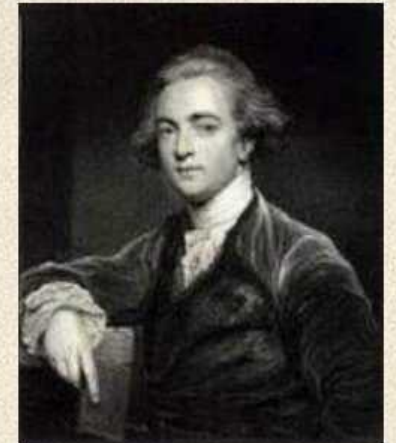
Beginning:

- Modern research in the history of **ancient India started** in the second half of the eighteenth century because of the needs of the **colonial administration** set up by the British.



Initial Efforts

- Translation of **Manusmriti into English** as **A Code of Gentoo Laws**.
- Establishment of **Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784** in **Calcutta** by **Sir William Jones**.
- Abhijananshakuntalam** was translated into English in **1789** by **William Jones**.



- **Bhagavadgita** was translated into English in **1785 by Wilkins**.
- **Bombay Asiatic Society** was set up in 1804 **James Mackintosh**.
- **Asiatic society of Great Britain** was set up in London in 1823.



Accentuation of Colonial Efforts:

- **Revolt of 1857:** After the revolt of 1857 Britain realized that a **deeper knowledge** of the manners and social system of Indians needed to be understood for them to rule.
- **Christian missionaries:** Wanted to find out the **Vulnerable points 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 Muller**.



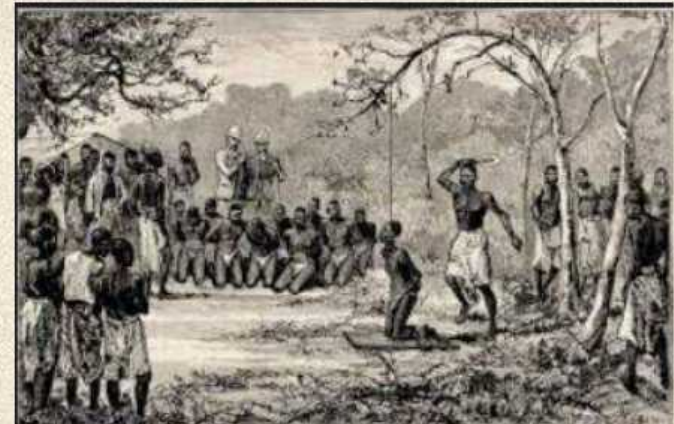
General Observations made by Colonial Historians:

- Ancient Indians **lacked a sense of history**, especially time and chronology.
- Indians were **accustomed to despotic rule**.
- They were engrossed in the problems of **spiritual ritualism** for the next world.
- The **caste system** was considered to be the most vicious form of **social discrimination**.
- Indians had neither **experienced feelings of nationhood**, nor any kind of self government.



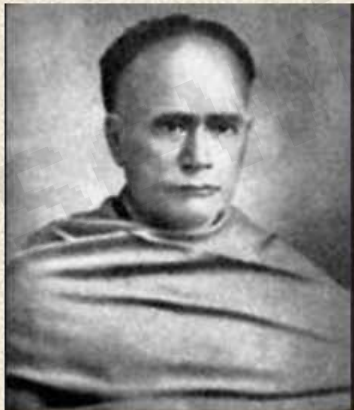
Conclusion:

- These generalizations appeared in early history of India by **Vincent Arthur Smith** (1843-1920). He gave primacy to **political history**. **Alexander's invasion** accounted for almost one third of his book.
- Colonial Historians also claimed that Indians were **incapable of governing themselves**.
- British interpretations of **Indian history** served to **denigrate Indian character** and achievements and **justify Colonial rule**.



Nationalist Approach and Contribution

- **Indians Response:** They were **irked** by the **colonialist distortions** of their **past history** such as the decaying **feudal Society of India** and promoted the **progressive capitalist Society** of England.
- Thus Indians took to themselves **social reform** apart from **reconstructing** ancient Indian history for **self government**.



Contribution of Nationalist Historians:

- **Rajendra Lal Mitra** published some **Vedic texts** and wrote a book entitled **Indo-Aryans** while **Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar** and **Vishwanath Kashinath Rajwade** also contributed in reconstructing the **social and political** history of the country.
- **Pandurang Vaman Kane** a social reformer wrote the **History of Dharma Shashtra** which helps us to make a **study of social processes** in ancient India.
- **Devdatta Ramakrishnan Bhandarkar** published books on **Ashoka** and on ancient **Indian political institutions**.



- **Hemchandra Ray Chaudhari** constructed the **history of Ancient India** from the time of Mahabharata to the **end of Gupta Empire**.
- **RC Majumdar** was the **editor of** the multi-volume publication **History and Culture of the Indian People**.
- **History of South India** was written by **K A Nilakanta Sastri** who emphasized on the **cultural Supremacy of the brahmins** and also highlighted the **harmony that prevailed** in Indian society.
- **KP Jaiswal** exploded the **myth of Indian despotism** by writing **several articles in Hindu Polity** in **1924** in which he showed that **republics existed in ancient times** and enjoyed a measure of **self government**.



General Observations of Indian Historians:

- Indian historians show that **India did have its political history** and that the Indian possessed **expertise in administration**.
- Indian scholars gave much less space to **Alexander's invasion** unlike VS Smith who **gave one third of the total space**. They stressed on the importance of the **dialogue of Porus** with Alexander and **Chandragupta Maurya Liberation** of North Western India from Seleucus.
- **KP Jaiswal** and A.S. Altekar **overplayed the role of the indigenous** rulers against the rule of Shakas and Kushans, little realizing that the central Asian and some other people had become the part and parcel of India's life.

Shift to non-political History

- **British historian: A.L. Basham** wrote the book **Wonder That was India(1951)** in which he provided a **sympathetic survey** of the **various facets of ancient Indian culture and Civilization** free from the prejudices that plagued the **writings of VS Smith** or other British writers. His books mark a **great shift from political to non political** history.
- **Indian Historians: DD Kosambi** followed the same in his book **An Introduction to the study of Indian History (1957)**. He followed the **materialistic interpretation** of history which was derived from the **writings of Karl Marx**. He showed the stages of **social and economic development** in terms of tribal and **class processes**.
- **New historians: They** put greater stress on **social economic and cultural processes** and try to relate them to **political development**. However few writers **magnify the role of religion** and believe that everything good and great originated in the country.
- It is therefore essential to make a balanced and objective view of ancient India.

