

7th - Tracing Changes Through Thousand Years I



Indian history is divided into three periods-ancient, medieval, and modern periods. The **ancient** period is said to stretch from the time humans learnt to write Emperor Harshavardhana's death in 647CE. The **medieval** period of Indian history is taken to extend from 647 to 1700 CE. The medieval period in India is further divided into the early medieval period (647-1200 CE) and the later medieval period (1200-1700 CE) to date.

New and Old Terminologies: Historical records exist in a variety of languages which have changed considerably over the years. Medieval Persian, for example, is different from modern Persian.

Take the term "Hindustan", for example. Today we understand it as "India", the modern nation- state. When the term was used in the thirteenth century by Minhaj-I Siraj, a chronicler who wrote in Persian, he meant the areas of Punjab, Haryana and the lands between the Ganga and Yamuna. He used the term in a political sense for lands that were a part of the dominions of the Delhi sultan. The fourteenth- century poet Amir Khusrau used the word "hind". While the idea of a geographical and cultural entity like "India" did exist, the term "Hindustan" did not carry the political and national meanings which we associate with it today.

Historians today have to be careful about the terms they use because they meant different things in the past. Take, for example, a simple term like "foreigner". It is used today to mean someone who is not an Indian. In the medieval period a "foreigner" was any stranger who appeared say in a given village, someone who was not a part of that society or culture. A city- dweller, therefore, might have peasants living in the same village were not foreigners to each other, even though then may have had different religious or caste background.

During the Vedic Age, India was called Sapta Sindhu or the Land of the Seven Rivers. These rivers were the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, Sutlej and the mythical Saraswati. In Sanskrit, the Persian 'H' gets replaced by 'S'. Thus, 'Sindhu' or Hindu was the name for India from very ancient times. The Greeks, called this land Indica. It is most probably from Indica that the subcontinent got its modern name 'India'.

Historians and their sources: Historians use different types of sources to learn about the past depending upon the period of their study and the nature of their investigation. Some continuity in the sources used by historians for the study of the period. They still rely on coins, inscriptions, architecture and textual records for information. But there is also considerable discontinuity. The number and variety of textual records increased dramatically during this period. They slowly displaced other types of available information. Through this period paper gradually became cheaper and more widely available. People used it to write holy texts, chronicles of rulers, letters and teachings of saints, petitions and judicial records, and for registers of accounts and taxes. Manuscripts were collected by wealthy people, rulers, monasteries and temples. They were placed in libraries and archives.

Archive: A place where documents and manuscripts are stored. Today all national and state governments have archives where they keep all their old official records and transactions.

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The different sources are:

Inscriptions: Inscriptions are writing engraved on hard surfaces like metal, rock and stone. The study of inscriptions is called epigraphy. The long poems in praise of kings are called prashasti. Since prashasti were normally written by court poets appointed by the kings they may not always be factually accurate. Copper plates inscriptions often record land grants by the rich to temples. They also record the achievement of the kings.

Coins: Coins are pieces of metal that used as money. The study of coins is called numismatics. Coins tell us about the kingdom, confirms dates during which particular kings ruled, their special interest and achievements.

Monument and Buildings: Monument and buildings often provide information about the period during which they were built. Temples, places and mosques can tell us not only of the religious practices but also about the political, economic and social conditions of that time.

Paintings: They illustrate the artistic progress of the time. They also tell us about the nature of society- the way of dressing, the customs followed, Important events, the life of the common people.

Literary Evidence: Literary evidence consists of historical writings, biographies, plays, novels and epics. Literary sources are of two types- indigenous sources (i.e., those created within the country) and foreign sources (those written by foreign travelers to the country).

