

Indian History for Beginners

By

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Acknowledgement

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Introduction

Why History is important?

Let me first begin by bringing out the basic difference between robots and human beings. Robots are considered as the replica of human beings. But they do not clutch on to the past memories for their present actions. In fact they don't have memories. They do not carry past. Robot's every action is a new action. There are no connections between the past actions and present actions in them. Even if it has to perform the same action it has to be programmed separately. Due to lack of memory, their actions are mechanical by nature and hence they are termed as machines. We human beings are not robots. We are endowed with a mind that is a store house of memories. Spiritual masters assert that our mind has endless capacity to store memories not only of the recent past but of all our previous births if any. Majority of our thinking, behaviors and actions are linked and modulated on the basis of the data received from past memories. Past is therefore a vital link for determining our present actions and shaping the future. It is therefore imperative to have acquaintance with the past in order to determine the present actions. This applies to an individual as well as to a society.

History is in general considered as the record of the past of humankind in which events, actions, decisions, lifestyles and time periods are recorded systematically. However, history is more than the recording of the past events and actions. It is largely an account of the changes and developments taking place in human ideas, material and cultural movements and its outcomes witnessed in human societies. We refer to history when we tend to examine the changes that have taken place over a period of time or the pace of material advancements in a region or country. Similarly, a historian when records the events of the past always tends to interpret them in the light of the present. History therefore acts as a reference point for knowing various changes taking place in society and existence of or continuities of traditions in society or region.

History is an important source of knowledge and learning. Any field of study whether science, mathematics or social sciences begins with a chapter on history. If there is no background provided in books about the origin or development of various scientific theories and principles, we might get confused or find it difficult to comprehend. The past knowledge helps in

providing connectivity to the present knowledge. At the same time we learn lessons from history. Humankind learnt a big lesson during the world wars after the destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima due to atom bombs. Since then the countries across the world have put all efforts and resources to prevent such deadly wars and maintained peace in the world. Similarly in India the partition of India and Pakistan was a learning lesson on the harsh consequences faced by the nation if community disharmony gets disrupted.

We also in life learn lessons from our past and proceed.

The significance of chronology in History

Time is an important component in human life. With reference to time we schedule things, accomplish work, recall events and examine past. In history, time is the most essential and requisite element. Documented history or recoded history should indicate the time period in the form of date (s) and century(s). Otherwise the recorded events of the past will lose authenticity and sound like fables or myths.

The past that is recorded and known is called the historical past. However, historical past is a vast time line that is difficult to remember and recall. Therefore, this time line in history writings is structured chronologically into periods and dates. Specifying the date or a period in history gives authenticity to the historical event or phase and makes history discipline scientific in nature. Ancient historical records in India were largely unauthentic and unreliable. The reason was that these records lack chronology and mixed up largely with philosophy and literature. For instance there was no difference between the historical Ram and the mythological Ram of the epic Ramayan in ancient writings. Hence, when foreign historians visited India they found it difficult to trace authentic historical records. They felt that Indians lack historical sense as they failed to mention time and mixed up past records with myths and fables.

Chronology in history is very important. It helps in understanding the course of historical events in coherent manner. This enables the reader to comprehend historical dates and periods easily. Chronology also helps in understanding and examining the changes and developments taking

place in historical periods. For instance Indian History is very vast and comprehensive. Therefore, it is divided into **Ancient Period** that starts from prehistoric age to 8th century C.E., **Medieval Period** from 8th century C.E. to mid 18th century C.E., **Modern Period** from mid 18th century to the first half of the 20th century and **Contemporary period** from second half of the 20th century to the present time. This categorization helps in understanding the basic changes and developments that took place in these historical periods.

The parameters for writing History

The study of history is divided into various periods and ages. These divisions are done on the basis of certain accepted parameters. Historians apply various parameters to mark periods and ages while constructing history. These parameters could be the marked changes and developments in political, social, economical and cultural fields. In mid twentieth century, some historians of west began to write 'Total History' which means examining all the factors i.e. political, social, geographical, economical and cultural. By writing history in this way the knowledge of the past became comprehensive and critical. Readers got a better view of the past.

However, Indian Historians of the past generally focused on writing political and economic history. As a result of this, periodization of Indian history was done by focusing on changes in polity, dynasty or kingdom. For example decline of the *Vardhan* dynasty and rise of Islamic rule in North India during the 8th century A.D. is considered as transition from ancient period to medieval period. Similarly decline of *Mughal* Empire and rise of British rule in the mid 18th century is considered as the transition from Medieval to Modern period. Contrary to this, the British writers wrote India's past on the basis of religion divisions. They divided Indian history into The Hindu India i.e. Ancient India, Islamic India i.e. Medieval India and British India or Modern India. Nowadays, India's past is constructed by including socio-cultural factors and people's views as well. However, this one sided view of Indian history is still found in school textbooks. No wonder that majority of the school children feels that Indian history is about kings and dynasties.

Keywords- BEC-Before Common Era, CE- Common Era

Part One

Ancient India from Prehistoric times to Eighth century C.E.

Chapter 1- Historical Sources

Sources for constructing History

Historians write past or rather construct past based on the available evidences. These evidences are usually consisting of written documents or material remains. Evidences in history are the source material for constructing the past. History becomes more scientific and objective if supported by authentic sources. By citing appropriate historical sources the historian interprets the past. However, interpretation in history is not uniform. Variation in views and understanding of historians on sources provide room for diversity of interpretation on similar historical events.

Ancient Indian history is constructed by examining following sources: Archeological Sources or material remains, inscriptions, literary sources and foreign accounts. Remote past of our country is largely constructed on the basis of archeological sources due to paucity of written records. These include temples and other material remains, inscriptions and coins. The latter i.e. coins, its study is known as Numismatics. Majority of our knowledge about the first civilization of India – The Indus Valley civilization, has come from archeological remains of the period.

The construction of Indian Medieval period and Modern period is largely done on the basis of written documents. These include official documents, literary works, foreign accounts and historical accounts of the period. Recently historians have started using individual's account as a source. This is done by taking first hand information from the people who had either participated or experienced the event. This methodology of constructing the near past is known as Oral History.

Historiography is the study of history. It refers either to the study of the methodology and development of history as a discipline, or to a body of historical works on a specialized topic such as historiography of a country or political history, social history, economic history or common people's history.

Historical research is supported by following sources:

Primary Sources- these are first-hand accounts of an event or time in history that has yet to be interpreted by another person. This includes:

- diaries, journals, letters, interviews, speeches, memos, manuscripts and other first-person accounts
- memoirs and autobiographies
- official records such as government publications, census data, court reports, police records
- minutes, reports, correspondence of an organization or agency
- newspaper and magazine articles, viewed as a whole, during the time of the event
- photographs, paintings, film and television programs, audio recordings which document an event
- research such as opinion polls which document attitudes and thought during the time of an event
- artifacts such as objects, tools, clothing, etc. of the time period or event
- communication through multimedia venues such as listservs, chatrooms, and electronic journals

Secondary Sources - are scholarly books or articles that are based on primary source data and analyze, critique, report, summarize, interpret, or restructure that data. They can also be based on a reading of other secondary sources or a combination of primary source data and secondary sources.

- Reference books such as encyclopedias, handbooks, etc.
- reviews
- textbooks
- most scholarly books
- most magazine and journal articles

Tertiary Sources - are finding tools. It include:

- library catalog
- magazine, journal, and newspaper databases or print indexes
- government documents databases or print indexes
- bibliographies
- literature guides
- finding aids to archival collections

Sources: <http://aumnicat.aum.edu/departments/instruction/general/primary.html>

Ancient Indian History Sources

It is amazing to know that Indian people came to know about the Great Ashoka only in the 19th century. Prior to that people knew him only through myths and fables. Similarly Indians were totally ignorant about the existence of Indus Valley civilization in India. The reason for such a lack of knowledge on our great historic past was absence of Archeological science and archeologists. The field of Archeology was well developed in west. During the British period many archeologists serving in East India Company initiated the archeological works in India. Due to their excavation works the world came to know the great antiquity of India.

Archeological sources like inscriptions, coins and material remains are the major sources for constructing India's remote past. Among them the most important are the inscriptions. Inscriptions are the writings carved on seals, stones, pillars, copper plates and rocks. Their study is called Epigraphy. The earliest inscriptions belong to 2500 years ago on the seals of Harappa – a major city-town of Indus valley civilization. The script on these seals is yet to be deciphered. Other important sources that inform us about the ancient period are literary scriptures like Brahmanical scriptures, Buddhist and Jain scriptures. These scriptures are written in *Sanskrit* and in ancient languages such as *Brahmi* and *Prakrit*.

Some of the significant British archeologists who helped in discovering India's remote past were: R Bruce, who discovered prehistoric sites in south in 1863. James Prinsep, who decoded an old Rock Inscriptions in 1837, led to the discovery of Ashoka the great. Sir John Marshal who initiated the excavation works of many sites in North Western India. These excavations led to the discovery of Indus valley civilization. Later, Sir John Marshal became the director general of Archeology of India.

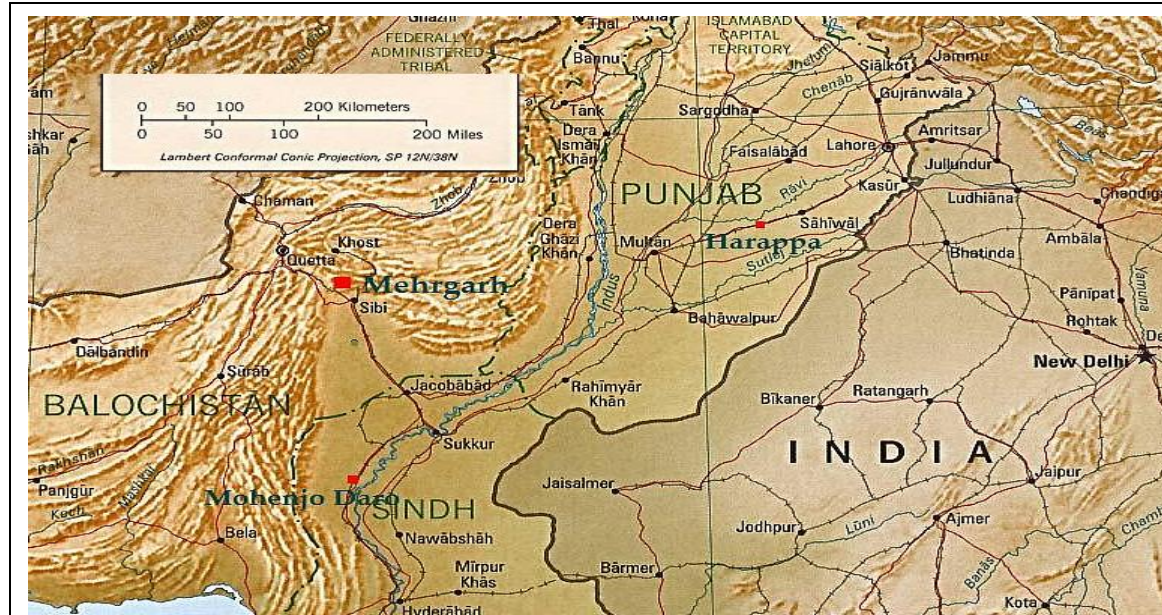
James Prinsep (1799 – 1840) was an English scholar and Orientalist. He was the founding editor of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and is best remembered for deciphering the *Kharosthi* and *Brahmi* scripts of ancient India. As an editor of the Asiatic Society journal, coins and copies of inscriptions from all over India were deciphered, translated, and published by him. He deciphered the inscriptions on rock edicts found around India. The edicts in *Brahmi* script mentioned a King *Devanampriya Piyadasi* assumed initially by Prinsep as a Sri Lankan king. He was then able to associate this title with Asoka on the basis of *Pali script* from Sri Lanka. These scripts were found on the pillars at Delhi and Allahabad and on rock inscriptions from both sides of India, and also the *Kharosthi* script in the coins and inscriptions of the north-west. His studies on inscriptions helped in the establishment of date of Indian dynasties based on references from accounts of Greeks.

Chapter 2- The Prehistoric period in India

Human History is broadly divided into historic period and prehistoric period. The period of which written records are available, is framed as historic period. Prior to the historic period, a long period of human's past existed which is still under study by archeologists and scholars. This period is generally known as prehistoric period. To have a better understanding of the historic past, the knowledge of prehistoric period is very essential. The prehistoric period has been examined on the basis of the availability of material remains, mainly tools and implements man used.

Archeologists on the basis of nature of tools and implements have divided the prehistoric period into three main stages. These are: The Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. We will study the Bronze Age and Iron Age later. The Stone Age was one when man used tools and weapons made of stone and bones. Stone Age is further divided into two phases. The first phase is known as Old Stone Age or Paleolithic age in which the man was a food gather and lived in caves. In the later part of Paleolithic phase the man learnt the art of making fire. The New Stone Age or Neolithic age is characterized with the invention of wheel and developments like producing food, domestication of animals and settled life.

Adequate work has not been done on the prehistoric period of Indian History. The work of R Bruce Foote is a landmark of Indian pre historic period. His discovery of Paleolithic at *Pallavaram* near Chennai in 1863 AD encouraged other experts to explore the field. Sites belonging to Neolithic period are found in Kashmir, Assam, Gujarat and in south. However, the ages of these sites vary from the sites discovered in other parts of the world.



Mehrgarh, in Baluchistan, Pakistan is an important Neolithic site of South Asia dating back from 7000 BCE to c. 2500 BCE. It is one of the earliest sites with evidence of farming mainly wheat and barley and herding of cattle, sheep and goats in South Asia. The site was discovered in 1974 by an archaeological team directed by French archaeologist Jean-François Jarrige.



Bimbaitka, the rock shelters are a prehistoric site located in Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh. The Bhimbetka shelters exhibit the earliest traces of human life in India. A number of analyses suggest that at least some of these shelters were inhabited by hominids more than 100,000 years ago. The site is characterized by the Stone Age rock paintings which are approximately 30,000 years old. The name *Bhimbetka* is associated with Bhima of *Mahabharata*, and overall meaning 'sitting place of Bhima'.

The Bronze Age and beginning of civilization

The Stone Age is not immediately followed by Bronze Age. The last phase of Neolithic culture witnessed another phase known as Chalcolithic culture where *Chalco* means Copper and *lithic* means stone. It was a copper-stone age where man started using copper along with stone for tools and implements. It is obviously that *in Chalcolithic* culture the man's life improved further. The most important feature of this phase was the development of the rural and village life.

Towards the end of *Chalcolithic* culture man discovered tin. Very soon man learnt to melt copper and tin to make a metal called Bronze. The Bronze tools and implements found to be better as they were harder and gave a sharper cutting edge than copper alone. It became a chief metal for about 2000 years. The period in which Bronze was used extensively is known as Bronze Age. Due to strong Bronze implements the man could able to bring large land under production. This led to rise in agricultural production and consequently agricultural surplus. The later i.e. agricultural surplus gave rise to various occupations and activities mainly trade and commerce and manufacturing. Rural settlements changed to semi urban and urban. This period is hence marked with developments in material life.

The Bronze Age is the most significant period in world's history. This period witnessed the emergence of Civilizations in Mesopotamia (Iraq), Egypt, China and India. Most of these civilizations flourished on the banks of river. Hence, these were also known as river valley civilizations. In India such a civilization emerged on the bank of river Indus. It is known as Indus Valley Civilization or Harappan civilization. In Egypt, on the bank of river Nile, the Egyptian civilization flourished. In China the first civilization belonging to Bronze period developed on the bank of River Yangtze. Mesopotamian civilization flourished on the banks of [Tigris-Euphrates river system](#).



Daimabad Chalcolithic cultural site - Daimabad is a village on the bank of the Pravara River, in Srirampur taluka in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra state. This site was discovered by B. P. Bopardikar in 1958. It has been excavated three times so far. The Discoveries at Daimabad showed the existence of Chalcolithic culture, and suggest that Late Harappan culture extended into the Deccan Plateau in India. Daimabad Chalcolithic cultural site showed distinct cultural phases which includes: Savalda culture existed before c.2300/2200 BCE , Late Harappan culture existed between c.2300/2200-1800 BCE, Malwa culture existed between c.1600-1400 BCE and in Phase V the Jorwe culture between c.1400-1000 BCE.

Some Chalcolithic Cultures of India

Ahara Culture: The sites of Ahar Culture were Aahar (Rajasthan), balathal, Gilund etc. The distinctive feature is black and red ware.

Kayatha Culture: Located in Chambal and its tributaries, the sturdy red slipped ware with chocolate designs is main feature

Malwa Culture: Narmada and its tributaries in Gujarat. One of the largest Chalcolithic

settlements.

Svalda Culture: The well-known sites are in Dhulia district of Maharashtra.

Prabhas and Rangpur Culture: Both of them are derived from the Harappa culture. The polished red ware is the hall mark of this culture.

Source- www.gktoday.in

Chapter 3- The Harappan Civilization – distinction and Ambiguity

The year 1921 was a landmark year in the history of India. In this year an ancient city called Harappa was unearthed from a mound in west Punjab now in Pakistan. Archeologists learnt that the city belonged to a very ancient civilization unknown to Indian history. It led to the discovery of a long forgotten civilization that was the contemporary of and as much advanced as Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations of Bronze period. Excavation works carried out at the Harappa and similar sites broke down many perceptions connected to Indian History. One of the perceptions that India's History begins with the coming of Aryans around got busted with the discovery of Harappan civilization.

Under the umbrella of Archaeological Survey of India many sites were discovered in the early decades of the 20th C. . These were : Harappa in Montgomery district of Punjab discovered by Rai Bahadur Dayaram Sahini , Mohenjodaro in Larkhana district of Sindh by R. D. Banerjee and K. N. Dikshit , Kalibangan in Rajasthan by B. K Thaper and B. B. Lal , Roper in Punjab , Alamgirpur in U.P , Banawali in Haryana , Lothal and Surkotada in Gujarat.

Harappan Civilization is also remembered by the name Indus Valley civilization or just Indus civilization since majority of its sites were on the banks of river Indus and its tributaries. However, later on, many sites having the similar features of Harappa site were found in far flung places. Therefore, the reference Harappan civilization appeared to be more appropriate than the Indus Valley civilization. The civilization was spread over on a vast area. Its western

extent includes the parts of Baluchistahn, the central extent includes Sindh, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat and the eastern part includes the fringes of west U.P. With such a vast extent the civilization underwent the three stages of development i.e. early, mature and late. In its mature stage the Harappan civilization was equated among the well developed civilizations of the ancient world. Archeologists and the Historians alike are still to decide upon the actual age of this civilization. Many believe that the Harappan cities and towns flourished from **c.2500 BCE** to 1500 BCE

Harappan Town

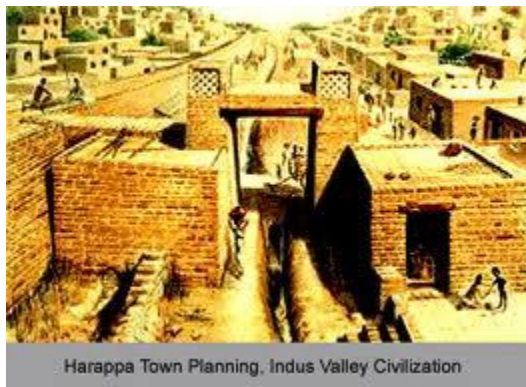
Most of our knowledge about Harappa culture has come from the material remains such as seals, ruins of buildings and streets, beads, weapons, terracotta, pottery, artifacts and figurines. Ruins of important sites like Harappa, Mohenjodaro and Lothal confirm that Harappa culture was an urban culture. Some of the vital features of Harappan cities were: town planning, drainage system and public building.

A typical Harappan city was built according to a definite and well thought out plan. The city was divided into two parts – the citadel and the proper town or the residential place. The citadel was constructed on a high platform, safe from floods, with well-fortified walls. Inside the citadel were impressive buildings and neatly laid down rows of houses. There were many massive public structures like granaries, important factories and workshops within the citadel. At Mohenjodaro, the citadel contained Great Bath, a unique public structure. Citadel was seat of rulers and administrators. Citadel indicates social divisions in the Harappan society. Outside the citadel was found houses of the workers and agrarian land. Brick streets and narrow lanes marked the Harappan city. The streets intersected at right angle and divided the city into square or rectangular blocks.

The houses were built on both sides of the streets. These varied in sizes i.e. from two rooms to palace. Almost all houses displayed same plan – a square courtyard and number of rooms with

door and windows at one side of the courtyard. The entrance door opened in lanes and not in the main street. No window or door faced the main street. Every house had a bathroom, a storeroom and a well. Walls were made of burnt bricks of standard size.

In the words of renowned historian, A. L. Basham, 'no other ancient civilization until that of the Roman had so efficient a system of drains.' Harappan had a well developed drainage system. Each lane and street carried drain channels that were connected to the main drains. Water and sewage from the houses were flowed into pits that were connected to drain channels. The drains were covered with stone slabs and channels were constructed with bricks. The ruins of the towns display a remarkable sense of sanitation.



Source: indianetzone.com

Life in Harappan Culture

One of the significant material remains of Harappa were the clay baked seals. Seal are the clay like tablets of varied shapes. On one side of the seal is an inscription followed by animal figure and on the other side i.e. reverse side is perforated knob. These are considered as the greatest expression of workmanship of Harappan artists. These seals were for multipurpose like trade, decoration and worship. Most of our information about the life in Harappa comes from these seals.

From the study of these seals we found that the Harappan culture was generally a materialistic culture. Town planning, drainage system, houses and public buildings are the evidences of their material advancement. Availability of dockyard at Lothal and abundance of seals in other

regions including overseas countries like Afghanistan, Sumer and Iran again confirms that trade and commerce had been the next important profession after agriculture. Mohenjodaro was a great trading center. At Lothal, large docks and ship building yards have been discovered. Harappan cities and towns were centers of art and crafts. People practiced pottery making, carpentry, spinning and weaving, brick making, toy making and jewelry making. In one of the site a factory has been discovered where necklaces were manufactured.



Terracota Seals from Harappan CivilizationSource:

Source - www.wondersofpakistan.com



Image of Lothal Shipyard in Gujarat; Source - www.harappa.com

The end of the Harappa culture was as mysterious as its beginning. According to Dr. Aural Stein, drastic climatic changes occurred in these regions leading to devastation of the agricultural production. Some scholars put the blame on earthquake, flood and other natural calamities for the disappearance of the culture. According to Dr. Raikes, the cities were exposed to a slow and continuous process of deterioration in environmental conditions. Some are of the view that change in the course of river Indus and river Ravi led to drying up of surrounding areas. Another cause cited for its extinct is the deforestation. To provide fuel to million of kiln producing burnt bricks, forests were cut recklessly that had led to the decrease in rainfall. Some scholars are of the view the outside invasions mainly Aryan invasion destroyed this civilization. However, this theory has been debated and many historians have rejected it