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SOURCES & TOOLS OF HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

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Nature of Sources & Historical Reconstruction

Sources are the very backbone of history. In other words to know history we must have some definite sources in our hand. It is rather easy to find sources for writings the history of the recent past because there is plenty of hand written and printed material on and about modern state and society. But it is mentioned in the great Indian epic Mahabharat that "History is that ancient description which contains instructions of virtue, wealth desire and salvation". In ancient Greece and Rome, there were historians to write the accounts of their times. But ancient Indians who wrote on many subjects, rarely wrote history. Most of ancient material has also been lost. It is thus a challenging task to rediscover India's ancient past. Yet there are sources from which history is written.

These sources are divided into two main groups. They are Archaeological and Literary. The Archaeological Source can again be divided into three groups, namely, Archaeological Remains and Monuments, Inscriptions and coins. The literary source can also be divided into three groups, namely, Religious literature, secular literature and Accounts of Foreigners.

Archaeological Sources

The archaeological sources played an important role in constructing or reconstructing the history of a region. The archaeological remains are subjected to scientific examination of radio- carbon method for its dates. Archaeological sources give us some knowledge of the life of the ancient people. Many historical places are lying buried under the earth. But excavations are being carried out to bring some such places to light. The material remains discovered from excavations and ruins speak a good deal of the past. For example, the excavations at Mohanjodaro and Harappa brought to the knowledge of the world the existence of the Indus valley civilization. All over India there are countless historical monuments like, Temples, Stupas, Monasteries, Forts, Palaces, and the like, which speak of their time. Similarly tools, implements, weapons and pottery, etc. throw light on the living conditions of the people. For historians, these are sources of information. In the opinion of some eminent

scholars, the history of India before the third century B.C., was mainly the result of archaeological research. Information gathered from literature and oral traditions can be taken as historical accounts only if archaeological evidence is available as supporting material.

INSCRIPTIONS

Inscriptions can be defined as writings on hard surfaces like stone, metal, on surfaces of structures, etc. The greatest advantage that inscriptions have over other media of writings are that they suffer a much reduced degree of wear and tear and thus survive for a much longer time. The earliest time from which inscriptions can be considered as the earliest evidences of the reading and writing. Inscriptions also help in the study of evolution of scripts and language, chronology, genealogy of kings (since, inscriptions were usually financed by kings, their origins and names were mentioned), determining the boundaries of empires (through distribution of inscriptions) and religious beliefs of the state (the Gods were usually honoured at the start of the inscriptions). For example-Seals of Harappa, Inscriptions of Ashoka, the Allahabad Pillar Inscription are there.

COINS

The study of coins, or numismatics was one of the most important sources of ancient Indian history. For example, the entire history of Indo-greek kings has been based on findings from coins. Legends on coins mention the ruler, date of issue, it may also contain the ruler's regnal period, most coins also have a stamped image of the emperor on them. The oldest coins from ancient India are from the 6th century BCE. Coins also help to know about the fiscal conditions in an empire. There are two theories regarding this. The first states that if purer gold is used to make coins, it shows a stronger economy and use of impure gold shows a weak economy. The second theory uses the frequency of coins for its analysis, if there are more coins circulating in the economy, it is taken to be proof that money economy has penetrated into society, which is linked with prosperity. For example-Coins of the Kushana and the Gupta period.

Excavated Material

Although archaeological sources are excavated material, when all finds are taken together in terms of the place where they are found, how deep underground they were found, and in terms of broad overview, it helps historians to draw conclusion about how history probably played out. For example, if Gupta and Kushana coins were found, it would help to determine their fiscal status and so on, but the information that they were discovered from the same site might suggest trade between them to a historian as well.

Architectural Remains

Most surviving architectural remains of the period are religious buildings like Buddhist stupas, temples, man-made caves, etc. Incidentally, Buddhist stupas are the oldest surviving architectural remains in India. Buildings give an idea of technological advancement of the people (by observing building techniques) and also an idea of how powerful kings or emperors were. For example-the Rathas at Mahabalipuram, Caves structures or Chaityas and Viharas of Buddhists.

Art (Paintings and Sculptures)

Rock paintings of the period have survived in the caves of Buddhist and Jain monks. These were usually depictions of facts observed from their day to day lives (and so can be used to form a view of how life was), however there were many scenes from the life of the Buddha and Tales from the Jatakas and other such books. Sculptures show the state of artistic

technique and it shows gradual refinement through the years. Ex-Dancing girls from Mohenjodaro, Bhimbetka paintings (Rock painting) also desiet the ancient art.

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