

Tracing Changes through a Thousand Years

The period from the second half of the 8th century up to first half of the 18th century is known as the “medieval period” of Indian history.

The maps by Arab geographer Al-Idrisi (1154) and French cartographer (1720) give a large sketch of the Indian subcontinent as known as earlier times.

Science of cartography, however, was different in two time periods.

New and Old Terminologies

- Historical records exist in a variety of languages.
- The term Hindustan was coined by Minhaj-i-Siraj, a chronicler who wrote in Persian for areas around Punjab, Haryana,
- and the lands between the Ganga and the Yamuna.
- Babur used Hindustan to describe the flora and fauna and the culture of the inhabitants of the subcontinent.
- Fourteenth-century poet Amir Khusrau used the word, Hind.
- In Hindi, the term ‘pardesi’ was used to describe an alien. In Persian, it was called ‘ajnabi’.

Historians and their Sources

- The information about the medieval period is derived from two sources: Archaeological and Literary.
- Archaeological sources available to us include monuments, temples, coins, tombs, ornaments and paintings.
- Since paper became available in good quantum, a lot of written accounts in the form of chronicles, autobiographies,
- farmaans and accounts of foreign travellers are available from this period in Persian and Arabic.

New Social and Political Group

- The study of the thousand years between 700 and 1750 is a huge challenge to historian largely because of the scale and variety of developments that occurred over the period.

- It was a period of great mobility. One such group of people was Rajputs. Other groups of warriors were Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, Ahoms and Kayasthas.
- Throughout the period there was a gradual clearing of forests and the extension of agriculture. Challenges in their habitat forced many forest-dwellers to migrate.
- As society became more differentiated people were grouped into jatis or sub-castes and ranked on the basis of their backgrounds and their occupations.
- Ranks were not fixed permanently and varied according to the power, influence and resources controlled by the members of the jati.
- A major development of this period was the emergence of the idea of bhakti.
- The teachings of the Holy Quran was also brought to India in the seventh century.
- Followers of Islam were divided into two sub-sects—'Shias' and 'Sunnis'.
- At different moments in this period, new technologies made their appearance, like Persian wheel in irrigation, the spinning wheel in weaving and firearms in combat. New foods and beverages also arrived in the subcontinent in this period.

Regions and Empires

- Large states like those of the Cholas, the Tughlaqs, or the Mughals encompassed many regions.
- A Sanskrit prashsti that praises Delhi Sultan Balban tells that he was the ruler of a vast empire that stretched from Bengal in the east to Ghazni in Afghanistan in the west and included all of South India (Dravida).
- There were considerable conflicts between various states.
- When the Mughal Empire declined in the 18th century, it led to the re-emergence of regional states.

Old and New Religions

- Religion was often closely associated with the social and economic organization of local communities.
- It was during the period that important changes occurred in religion. It included the worship of new deities, construction of temples by royalty and the growing importance of Brahmanas in the Hindu religion.
- Knowledge of Sanskrit helped Brahmins to earn respect.
- Islam was patronized by many rulers.

Historical Periods

- The British historians divided the history of India into three periods: Hindu, Muslim and British.
- Most historians look to economic and social factors to characterize the major elements of different moments of the past.
- The life of hunter-gatherers, early farmers and early empires were called early societies.

- The growth of imperial state formations, development of Hinduism and Islam as major religions and the arrival of
- European trading companies were called the medieval period.
- The last era was called the modern period which carried a sense of material progress and intellectual development.
- Prosperity during this period brought European trading companies to India.

Maps are the sources through which we can trace out the historical changes and contexts.

Cartographers were the skilled artists who recorded these chronological effects in Maps.

The mode of presentation and the contexts vary through time. The maps of 1154 CE are not the same as the maps of the 1720s, e.g. one can see the maps given in NCERT Textbook on pages 1 and 2. Both the maps show the same location but with a lot of variations. Even the names of the places are spelt differently.

Historical records are available in different languages. Differences are also traced in the use of grammar and vocabulary, change in meaning also occurred over time, e.g., the term Hindustan is now 'India'.

The term Hindustan was first used by Minhaj-i Siraj, a Persian chronicler, in the 13th century.

Minhaj-i Siraj's Hindustan constituted the areas of Punjab, Haryana and the lands between the Ganga and Yamuna. The term was used in a political sense for lands forming the parts of the dominions of the Delhi Sultan. South India was not included in this map.

Babur, in the early 16th century, used the term Hindustan in order to describe the geography, the fauna and the culture of the inhabitants of the subcontinent. Amir Khusrau used the term Hind in a similar sense in the 14th century.

With the change of time, we observe that the idea of a geographical and cultural entity like 'India' did exist but the term Hindustan did not carry the political and national meanings which we associate with it today.

We trace out many changes in the use of words with the change of time. For example, the word 'foreigner' is used in the sense of one who is not an Indian, whereas it was, in the medieval period, used in the sense of one who was a part of the same village but not a part of a particular society or culture. The synonymous words for 'foreigner' in Hindi and Persian are 'pardesi' and 'ajnabi' respectively.

Historians use different sources to study the past depending upon the period of their investigation. Coins, inscriptions, architecture and textual records are still the basic sources.

During the period of 700 to 1750, we trace out a dramatic increase in the variety of textual records. Its basic reason was that paper gradually became cheaper and more widely available. It was extensively used in writing the holy texts, chronicles of rulers, letters and teachings of saints, petitions and judicial records, and for registers of accounts and taxes.

Manuscripts collected from wealthy people, rulers, monasteries and temples were placed in libraries and archives. These manuscripts and documents helped the historians with several detailed information though it is difficult to use them.

As there was no printing press in those days scribes used to copy down manuscripts by hand. Hence they were somewhere not very legible. Some changes in words and sentences were also made, in fact not knowingly, in the manuscripts while copying. This brought the same manuscripts copied presented differently by different scribes. It poses a serious problem to determine which the original one was.

The authors used to revise their chronicles from time to time. Ziyauddin Barani, a 14th century author revised his chronicle for the first time in 1356 followed by another version two years later. In fact, the two versions differed from each other but as the original one was traceless, nobody could claim for the difference.

The period between 700 and 1750 was a phase of transition as a lot of developments took place. The Persian wheel in irrigation, the spinning wheel in weaving and firearms in combat were some of the examples of developments.

The subcontinent saw new food like potatoes, corn, chillies, tea and coffee.

The new technologies and crops came along with the migrants who also brought other ideas with them.

It was a period of economic, political, social and cultural changes and also of great mobility.

People travelled to far off lands to make their fortune.

Rajputs, i.e. Rajputs, one of the prominent communities were the group of warriors between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. They were the 'kshatriyas' by caste status. They included the rulers, chieftains, soldiers and commanders serving in the armies of

the different monarchs all over the subcontinent. Extreme valour and a great sense of loyalty were the prominent qualities of this community.

Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, Ahoms and Kayasthas (a caste of scribes and secretaries) were the other prominent classes of people.

This period witnessed a gradual clearing of forests and the extension of agriculture. It caused changes in people's 'habitat' which forced many of the forest-dwellers to migrate.

Some others adopted tilling the land and became peasants and soon became part of large complex societies. They were also put under tax cover as per their status which gave rise to many jatis i.e. sub-castes.

The divisions of sub-castes were made on the basis of their backgrounds and occupations. Ranks were variable as per the change in power, influence and resources controlled by members of the jati. This status of the same jati varied from area to area.

Jatis had their own system of ruling. They framed rules and regulations in order to manage their own people. An assembly of elders called JatiPanchayat was responsible for enforcing the regulations.

Jatis were bound to follow the rules of their villages. Villages constituted only one small unit of a state and were governed by a chieftain.

The subcontinent was divided into several regions which were ruled by empires of different dynasties. By 700 several regions developed their distinct geographical dimensions and their own cultural characteristics.

During the period of 700 and 1750 (the thousand years of history that we are exploring here) there were significant developments in religious traditions.

The changes were seen in people's beliefs. Hinduism saw a great many changes which included the worship of new deities the construction of temples by royalty and growing dominance of Brahmanas and the priests.

For their knowledge of Sanskrit texts Brahmanas earned great respect in society. The new rulers were their patrons.

The most significant development of the period was the rise of the idea of bhakti which also paved the rise of many new religions in the subcontinent.

The teachings of the holy Quran was brought to India in the seventh century by the migrants.

Quran is the most prominent holy book of the Muslims which delineates the idea of one God, Allah and His love, bounty and mercy for those who believe in Him.

Islam and the Ulema—the learned theologians and jurists were patronized by many rulers.

Like Hinduism, Islam was also interpreted in many ways and the followers of Islam were divided in two sub-sects—Shias and Sunnis.

For historians, time reflects changes in social and economic organization, in the persistence and transformation of ideas and beliefs. Hence for the historians, it becomes convenient to study time by dividing it into segments—periods—that possess shared characteristics.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the history of India was divided into three periods —Hindu, Muslim, and British. It was done so because there was no significant historical development other than religion.

This periodisation is followed by some of the historians even today.

Cartographer: The artist who is skilled in drawing or making maps. .

Chronicler: One who writes history or pens down the events of the time from the historical point of view.

Archives: A collection of historical documents or records of the government, a family, a place or an organization; the place where these records are stored.

Manuscripts: The original script written by the Author in his/her own handwriting.

Habitat: The living condition of specie.

Patron: A person with influence and affluence who provides support with money and mental boost up to an artist, a craftsman, a learned man, or a noble, or some other persons of such categories.

Jati: The sub-caste which was defined or identified on the basis of one's profession, status and influence.

Region: The particular area designated or occupied by a certain group or empire.

Periodisation: Division of time into different segments for the purpose of study from the historical point of view. It was done on the basis of dominant factors of the time. In the middle of the nineteenth century, British historians divided the history of India into three periods—Hindu, Muslim, and British.

Seventh century AD – The teachings of the holy Quran brought to India.

1154 – Map of the Indian Subcontinent made by al-Idrisi.

1266-1287 – Reign of the Delhi Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban.

1356 – Ziyauddin Barani wrote his first chronicle. He wrote another version two years later.

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