
UNIT 1 RECONSTRUCTING ANCIENT SOCIETY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOURCES

Structure

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this unit is to acquaint the learner with the interpretations of the sources that reveal the nature of the ancient society. We therefore need to define the meaning of the term ‘ancient society’ to begin with and then move on to define a loose chronology in the context of the sources and their readings. It would also be useful to have an understanding about the various readings of the sources, a kind of a historiography of the interpretative regime.

In order to facilitate a better understanding this unit is divided into five sections. In the introduction we have discussed the range of interpretations that are deployed on the sources and often the sources also become interpretative in nature. The complexity of the sources has also been dealt with in the same context. The new section then discusses the ancient society and what it means. This discussion is spread across the regions and the varying sources that range from archaeology to oral traditions. The last section then gives some concluding remarks.

1.1 SOURCES

Here we introduce you to different kinds of sources that help us reconstruct the social structure.

1.1.1 Epigraphy

Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions. Epigraphic evidence form one of the most reliable sources of ancient history. Inscriptions are engraved on stone tablets, metal plates, pillars, walls of caves, etc. The inscriptions represent various languages at different places and period of time. Some inscriptions give details about the political and religious activities of that time. Others are official, commemorative and historical.

Introductory

The edicts of Asoka, the pillars of Samudragupta and Rudradaman I are religious and administrative inscriptions. Bilingual inscriptions at Delhi and Berhampur and musical rules found in the Pudukottai, treatise on architecture inscribed on a tower at Chittor are some other interesting examples of inscriptions.

Inscriptions on metal plates also cast light on the historical period. The Mandasor copper plates, the Sohgaura plate from Gorakhpur district, the Aihole inscription of Mahendra-Varman, the Uttiramerur inscriptions of Cholas cast light on trade, taxes and currency. Some of these dated in the Saka and Vikrama era reflect on the social condition of India. They give knowledge about the boundaries of kingdoms and empire.

Epigraphy throws light on the life lived in the past, the nature of society and economy and the general state of life. Inscriptions in the South Indian context found on the hero stones for instance open up a different dimension of a pastoral economy for our consideration.

1.1.2 Numismatics

Numismatics is the study of coins. The coins made of gold, silver and copper speak of the economic situation of that period. Coins give us information about some chronological issues as well. They also give us information about the extent of influence of particular ruler or kingdom and its relations with the distant areas. Roman coins discovered in India give us an idea about the existence of contacts with the Roman Empire. Portraits and figures, Hellenistic art and dates on the coins of the western satraps of Saurashtra are remarkable sources for reconstructing this period. The Puranic accounts of the Satavahanas are ascertained from the Jogalthambi hoard of coins.

The circulation of coins in gold and silver during the Gupta Empire imparts an idea of the healthy economic condition during the rule of the Guptas. The entire argument for instance on the urban decay rests on the paucity of currency and lesser content of precious metals in coins in that period.

1.1.3 Archaeology

Archaeology is the study of the material remains of the past. They include buildings, monuments and other material relics that the inhabitants of that period were associated with. Besides all these pots, pottery, seals, skeletal remains all are inseparable parts of the reconstructing the context in which they were found.

Lord Curzon under the Director Generalship of Dr Marshall set up the Department of Archaeology. Excavations conducted at various sites in the valley of the river Indus, Lothal in Gujarat, Kalibangan in Rajasthan, at Sind and Punjab give us knowledge of the civilization during about 2700 BC. Excavations at Taxilla give an idea about the Kushanas.

Similarity of monuments excavated in India and abroad establish a relations between various areas Excavations at south Indian sites such as Adichanallur, Chandravalli, Brahmagiri highlight the prehistoric periods. The rock cut temples of Ajanta and Ellora with its sculptures and paintings express the artistic finery of that period.

1.1.4 Literature

Literature in the ancient period was not fuelled by the urge to preserve history but was a complication of experiences and rules of worship. The literature includes the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aryankas, the Upanishads, the Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Brahashastras, the Puranas.

The Buddhist and Jain literature gives knowledge of the traditions prevalent in those periods. The literature of this period is in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit. It gives us knowledge about music, dance, painting architecture and administration of various kings. Kautilya's Arthashastra is a remarkable work on the system of administration. The Sangam literature in south is an elaborate record of life in South India.

1.2 INTERPRETATION

Historical problems can be discussed with open minds only. Rewriting of History is a continuous process into which historian brings to bear new methodological or ideological insights or employs a new analytical frame drawn upon hitherto unknown facts. The historians' craft as Marc Bloch, has reminded us, is rooted in a method specific to history as a discipline, most of which has evolved through philosophical engagements and empirical investigations during the last several centuries. No methodology which historian invokes in pursuit of the knowledge of the past is really valid unless it respects the method of the discipline. Even when methodologies fundamentally differ, they share certain common grounds, which constitute the field of the historian's craft. Notwithstanding the present skepticism about the possible engagement with History, a strict adherence to the method of the discipline is observed in all generally accepted forms of reconstruction of the past. The students of history should not be presenting definitive conclusions but suggesting possibilities that are based on the sound reading of the evidence. Here we have taken into consideration anthropological, archaeological and textual sources to illustrate the study of ancient society. The anthropological reading of the source pertains to a reading of a tribe; the archaeological reading considers a chalcolithic settlement and the textual one looks at the Rigveda in terms of an interpretation of a textual source. Though we have not followed any definitive chronology here, yet there is a certain understanding of time sequencing. Let us first understand the various readings of the 'ancient Indian history' before we get into the context of these sources discussed above.

The colonial construction of India's past forms the earlier modern writing of Indian history. European scholars searched for histories of India that would have conformed to their stereotype of history writing but could find none. The only exception was Kalhana's Rajatarangini, a twelfth century history of Kashmir. There were primarily two strands of writing Indian history in the colonial perspective, the Utilitarian and the Orientalist. The Utilitarian perspective basically argued for a changeless society in the Indian subcontinent. It also suggested that this backward society can be changed through legislation which could be used by the British administrators to bring about 'progress' in the other wise stagnant and retrograde Indian society. James Mill thus harped on the negative aspects of Indian society. Although James Mill's periodisation of Indian history into Hindu and Muslim periods is generally pointed out as an example of this colonial view, almost every aspect of the social, cultural and political life was incorporated into this religious schema. This view has had an abiding influence on Indian historiography, with a large number of Indian historians of vastly different ideological persuasions rather uncritically internalizing

this interpretation. Thus the history of India is seen through a series of stereotypes rooted in religious identity. No aspect of society or polity has escaped this religious view, be it social tensions, political battles or cultural differences.

The Utilitarians also are credited with the dubious theory of the Oriental Despotism. The theory of Oriental Despotism argued for an existence of a system of governance that consisted of a despotic ruler with absolute power at the top and the self-sufficient villages at the bottom. The surplus created by the villages was creamed by the despotic ruler and his court. Much of the Asia was assumed to be arid and the control of irrigation networks was critical in the system of control. Later on Marx too took a leaf out of this theory and gave a different mode of production, the 'Asiatic' to the Asian society. It was the later more scientific reflection on India's past, first by the Nationalist school and later on by the Marxists that led to the rejection of this rather obscurantist view of the past. Indian history in the 1960s and 70s moved from being largely a body of information on dynasties and a recital of glorious deeds to a broad based study of social forms. In this there was a focus on religious movements, on patterns of the economy and on cultural articulations. The multiple cultures of India were explored in terms of how they contributed to the making of Indian civilization. Therefore, many aspects of this multiplicity and its varying cultures – from that of forest dwellers, jhum cultivators, pastoralists, peasants, artisans, to that of merchants, aristocracies and specialists of ritual and belief – all found a place in the mosaic that was gradually being constructed. Identities were not singular but plural and the most meaningful studies were of situations where identities overlapped.

These included Marxism of various kinds, schools of interdisciplinary research such as the French Annales School, varieties of structuralism and others. Lively debates on the Marxist interpretation of history, for example, led to the rejection of the Asiatic Mode of Production as proposed by Marx, and instead focused on other aspects of Marxist history. There was no uniform reading among Marxists, leading to many stimulating discussions on social and economic history. The ideas of historians, such as Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel and Henri Pirenne, were included in these discussions. The intention was not to apply theories without questioning them, but to use comparative history to ask searching questions.

1.3 THE ANCIENT SOCIETY: ANTHROPOLOGICAL READINGS

'At the easternmost reach of the inhabited world, beyond which lies nothing but empty desert, there is an enormous country populated with fantastic animals as well as strange nations and tribes. It is a place of mighty banyan trees, of a sun so hot it appears ten times its ordinary size of multiple great rivers fed by torrential rains. Gryphons and satyrs roam there along with gigantic elephants, deadly snakes, multicolored peacocks and parrots, fierce jackals, and manlike monkeys. Its human population is more numerous than that of any other land. The people in the North are tall and fair, resembling Egyptians, while those in the South are dark skinned; like Ethiopians, though lacking their woolly hair. The northerners, long lived and free of disease, wear brightly colored clothing ornamented with jewelry of gold and sparkling stones. Settled agriculturists, their land is so bountiful it sustains two growing seasons every year. Organized into stable classes, they are ruled by kinds who live in opulent palaces graced by pleasure gardens, and are guided by wise philosophers,

who, like Plato, teach the immortality of the soul. The people of the North pay a tribute in gold to the Persians which they acquire effortlessly in their deserts from deposits left by huge gold-burrowing ants. Bizarre nomadic tribes are scattered throughout the rest of the country including pygmies, cannibals, breastless Amazons, men without noses, giants five fathoms tall, headless people, as well as those with feet so large they are able to use them as umbrellas, shielding themselves from the sun while lying on their backs. The entire land is wealthy in ordinary crops, herd animals, and gold, but also in beautiful gems, shimmering silk, exotic spices, and potent drugs.'

This is the view of India that arose in Greece between the sixth and fourth centuries BC, was passed on to the Romans when they superseded the Greeks as the centre of the ancient Mediterranean world, and migrated to Northern Europe after the Roman Empire fell under the impact of the barbarian invasions. Its principal sources lie in the writings of four men: Scylax of Caryanda, a Greek officer sent by Darius, the ruler of Persia, around 515 BC to reconnoiter the Indus valley, his easternmost province; Herodotus who wrote about India half a century later in *The Histories*, his famous treatment of the Persian wars; Ctesias of Cnidus, critic of Herodotus, and Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to the court of the Mauryas, who resided in the Gangetic plain and wrote extensively about Indian institutions and customs around 300 BC, in the aftermath of Alexander the Great's invasion. Here the quotation above reveals the way the ancient Greece thought about the East. Similar notions have prevailed regarding the earliest societies. This rather exotic view of the past needs to be tempered with more measured understanding of our past.

At the stage of hunting and gathering, the society, as we understand it had not emerged. The units hunted together for a while and dispersed. There was no permanency in societal relationships. This stage of gathering and hunting remained for almost ten million years. It is only with the domestication of plants and animals that the first settlements emerge. The transition from gathering and hunting to the domestication of plants and animals also resulted in the emergence of what is known as the tribal world. It was a condition where three elements defined the nature of that condition, viz, the production was for consumption, individual rights were embedded in the community ownership rights and authority and not power was respected.

The label "tribe" has been an unstable category that has been deployed within multiple networks of power relations, such as state-society, local-national and national-global spheres. We will question the contending meaning of tribes, variously defined as indigenous, aboriginal, primitive, underdeveloped, disempowered and marginalized. Conversely, we will draw attention to the ways in which "tribe" has also been used to empower and resist the nation state and the global economy. British colonial rule imagined and institutionalized tribes in the northern and north-west frontier, tribe-based demands for statehood in areas such as Jharkhand and Bodoland, the creation of tribe as an economic and political category in the north-eastern frontier, the politics of tribal identities in Assam today and the resurgence of the figure of the tribal in contemporary literary and cultural discourses of globalization.

The term *adivasi* was coined as a translation to the colonial category of aboriginal. The tribal and the aboriginal are not synonymous categories. They are infact two different categories altogether. The term *tribe* refers to the political organization of the community while the term *aboriginal* means one present from the beginning

(origin) or of the sunrise (literal meaning). Any identification of a particular people with the area implies a genetic sub text and a continuity of between them and the first human populations of those regions. This hypothesis may have some limited validity in the New World but none in the Old World.

Let us consider the ground reality as is obtained from the archaeological data. There is considerable evidence that the domestication of plants and animals occurred at different places in the subcontinent at times. The site near Allahabad suggests an introduction of wild rice and tame animals in the diets of the people in the region by the eighth millennium BC. We have sites from sixth millennium BC where there is enough evidence of domestication of cattle, sheep and goats. Mehrgarh at the foot of the Bolan Pass in the 9000BP gives us signs of wheat and barley. The archaeological evidence does not support the consistent superiority of farming as a subsistence strategy for some millennia after its appearance.

In fact the opening of the first millennium BC saw the prevalence of hunting and gathering, pastoralism and agriculture as the three varying strategy as per the demands of the eco-niche in the subcontinent. We cannot place the 'tribal' in the hunter gatherer context always. These were responses determined by the eco-niche and the limitations of manpower and technology.

The state too had an uneasy relationship with the people who lived in the forests. The forest produce was crucial to the state, and the control over the same was desirable. The Mauryan State for instance, in one telling stroke warned the forest dwellers thus, "*and the forest folk who live in the dominions of the Beloved of Gods, even them he entreats and exhorts in regard to their duty. It is hereby explained to them that, inspite of his repentance, the Beloved of the Gods possesses power enough to punish them for their crimes so that they would turn from their evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes.*" The 13th rock edict is remarkable for its clarity and ruthlessness. An empire had to be run and the resources had to be marshalled. It was in that context that the people were being warned.

Let us now consider the so-called tribal, in the context of the above. Though we cannot argue from the perspective of the indigenous, certainly we can form the perspective of the marginalized. The first question to be asked pertains to the defining elements of the term 'tribal'. Prof. Shereen Ratnasar has argued a tribe is not just a group of people that shares a common culture, a name, an ethnic identity, and a language/dialect; more important, its members, even if they live in dispersed villages or pasture grounds, believe they are one people because they trace their origins to a common ancestor. Descent is traced most often through the male line, but in some groups like the Khasis, through the female line.

A common ancestor means that members are believed to be related by blood. An individual is a member of a tribal society by virtue of his/her birth in it. The resources of nature have been inherited from the tribal ancestors or ancestor-gods, are held by the group as a group in trust for future members, and hence are not alienable. Sometimes a tribe with a large population has internal divisions (clans, lineages, or sections) that each hold their own areas of natural resources, so that a member has rights to them by virtue of birth in a particular lineage, section, or clan. To be related by kinship (blood), furthermore, means a series of duties and obligations towards others in the tribe. Of course, this does not prevent friction or disputes altogether, and it could be said that the low level of development of institutions of dispute settlement is one of the limitations of tribal society.

When did this kind of social organization come into being? The earliest societies in the world were not tribes, but are called 'bands' or 'hunter-gatherers'. Periodic movement, no permanent villages, and the lack of clearly defined membership in residence groups characterized them. The only stable social group was the family. The men of different families might co-operate in raising shelters at a seasonal settlement, or in hunting a large animal, but such co-operation was only for that particular task. A hunting team formed a week later may be constituted by some of these participants, but also other men.

When agriculture began (thousands of years ago), people settled down to cultivate land. In terms of work, agriculture was different from hunting and gathering. The returns on labour were no longer immediate: you ploughed a field and sowed the seed, say, with the first rains of the year, but the crop was ready to harvest several weeks later. And then you stored the cereal rice, wheat, or barley, to last you until the next harvest. So sedentary and stable village life, and sustained co-operation between families, were characteristic social correlates of the new economy. This is the context in which societies united by kinship, which are known as 'tribes', came into being.

It is in the context of the above that we need to locate the archaeological evidence in its anthropological readings. The two go together and give an interpretative support. The site of Inamgaon in the Deccan is a good case in point for the same.

1.4 NATURE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The realm of archaeology in the south asian context is rooted in the so called hard data or scientific precision. We do not have the city of Pompeii here. In most of the cases the archaeologist deals with material that has been discarded by the people who were using it once. These things make little sense outside of the context in which they are found. So the archaeological data gets understood in the from the attributes of the excavated material in the context in which it is found and the inference that is drawn from it. These are the limiting factors for the data. It cannot by itself argue about the identity of an ethnicity, though it may suggest the existence of various groups by the manner in which the material remains differ. It in this case and in many other requires a corroborative evidence from other sources, textual, epigraphic or numismatic. In some instances the other corroborative source may not exist. In such situations the archaeologist will have to generalize on the basis of living prehistory, i.e. from observing a phenomenon that still exist and try and make a connection. The richness of the material remains may also pose a range of questions to archaeology. The interpretation of the same from the historical point of view will thus largely depend on the context in which the data is being excavated as well as the context from which it is being argued out.

If for instance a typical chalcolithic settlement were excavated then it would yield in a structured stratigraphy a variety of artifacts. It would for instance yield pottery, animal bones, grain, burial and a host of other things. In order to make any sense out of that material we need to analyze it in the context in which it was taken out. Thus the reading of stratigraphy would be vital along with the relationship of all the artifacts in the same strata to be contextualised. In Inamgaon for instance (a chalcolithic site excavated by the team of archaeologists from the Deccan College) the excavation was carried out from 1968 to 1983. This is perhaps the longest excavation done in the annals of chalcolithic sites in the Indian context. The excavation at Inamgaon

allow us to examine the changes that occur in the material culture over a period of time, from 1600 to 700 BC. This time span is further divided on the basis of the stratigraphy and the difference in the material cultural sequence into three periods the Malwa (is the earliest) the Early Jorwe and the Late Jorwe. Further generalizations could be drawn about the subsistence patterns, social stratification and changing nature of the settlement. Still further generalizations are possible which could be drawn on the issues that pertain to the social structures. Here there might be a divergent opinion, as we do not have any corroborative evidence in the form of epigraphy or numismatics or oral tradition or textual sources. Here the site itself is a text that would be deconstructed. The archaeological evidence in this case is the only evidence. But there would be other contexts and other time sequences where there is other kind of evidences, available in the form of inscriptions, coins, texts and oral traditions. In such a situation the nature and the interpretation of the archaeological evidence would confirm, deny or throw an alternative argument for historians consideration. Let us also remember that archaeology is a discipline in its own right. Such as this discipline has also its own epistemology and historiography. The nature of interpretation would depend on which of the historiographical traditions the archaeologist is drawing upon to arrive at the generalizations. Archaeology in that sense is not a sub discipline of history in a sense epigraphy or numismatics is.

Let us now move on to the textual context beyond the chalcolithic and towards the threshold of the change in the ancient society.

1.5 TEXTUAL SOURCES

Let us now turn to the textual sources. Here we will take one specific example of Rig-veda to illustrate our point regarding the textual sources and our understanding of the same. Rig-veda is not an easy source to understand the past. However it is one of the most important ones, as it is the earliest of the textual sources. Rig-veda is dated roughly to 1500-1000 BC.

Rig-veda is not like the Arthashastra or the Puranas. It is not a work of literature as well. The earlier commentary with the text of Rig-veda is compiled by Yaska who is dated even before Panini (before 400BC). Yaska also refers to the earlier commentaries written before him. This suggests that Yaska is not the first one to comment on the text. Today the text that we get is the one compiled by Sayana (1387 AD).

Let us analyze this text to understand the difficulties related to it. The text is compiled in the 'vedic' language that predates Sanskrit. It is a compilation of 1028 suktas/hymns that panegyryze the gods. It is divided in ten mandals out of which the first and the tenth mandala have been compiled later. It is not a religious text alone. It is a collection of a composition of hymns serving useful purposes. It was passed on from generation to generation through a pre decided manner of recitation. There are a number of ways in which the Rig-veda can be recited.

It paints a picture of a society that was pastoral in nature, tribal in terms of social structure and gave tremendous importance to the cow. Horse and the chariot were valued in times of war. There are references to the gods such as the Indra and Agni. The simile used in the text is a votary of historical information. For instance we do get references to cattle wealth and its importance. Clearly the early society value the herd and the wealth was counted in terms of the number of cattle one had.

The Rig-veda as a text then provides us with a glimpse of one segment of culture that was pastoral. It indicates as to what the society valued as wealth and also gives some indicators of the material cultural context which the archaeology can look for.

1.6 SUMMARY

The search for the source is as endless as its explanatory regime. We need to for our part as students of history should see to it that the dialogue between the historian and her/his past remains within the parameters of reasonableness and not degenerate into a comedy of errors that is colored by obscurantist political perspectives. The field of sources and their interpretation is a contested field, never more so than now. The task of the historian would be to see to it that the field does remain in the domain of historical dialogue and not lapse into the general free for all.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Indigenous: Belonging to or native to a particular land in a region.

Marginalised: Groups, communities pushed to the edges of a society due to a one sided developmental process.

1.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the various sources of reading India's past.
- 2) Why is interpretation important? Discuss in the light of the explanation offered above.
- 3) Write a short note on reading archaeology.
- 4) Discuss the text of Rig-veda as a source.
- 5) What constitutes a source for the study of history?