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Author(s): Romila Thapar

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## INTERPRETATIONS OF ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

ROMILA THAPAR

Despite the stereotypes of “unchanging India” and her “unhistorical” religions and peoples, the historical writing on ancient India goes back for more than two centuries and exhibits an instructive series of changes in interpretation. The historical writings produced by European scholars, beginning in the eighteenth century, were formulated in terms of the ideological attitudes then dominant in Europe, and naturally these were significantly different from the indigenous tradition of ancient India. European ideologies entailed a set of attitudes toward India which were for the most part highly critical, though there were also some sympathetic historians. These ideologies continued to be influential even after Indian scholars began to write, since they often wrote in reply to earlier interpretations and were therefore still molded by them. It has been only in recent years that the influence of ideologies on the interpretation of Indian history has been recognized; perhaps now for the first time a history of the changing interpretations of ancient India can be written.

India was by no means a country unknown to Europe. In the post-Renaissance period knowledge of and familiarity with things Indian grew with the visits of merchants, ambassadors, and missionaries from various parts of Europe to the Indian sub-continent. The accounts written by some of these visitors — such as those of Sir Thomas Roe, the ambassador of James I to the Mughal court of the emperor Jahangir,<sup>1</sup> or François Bernier who visited India in 1668 and was associated with the court of Louis XIV<sup>2</sup> — became the basic European source of information on India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some of these accounts were fairly reliable; others were a mixture of observation and a large amount of fantasy.

The first serious study of India and its past began in the late eighteenth century with the work of scholars who have since been described as the Orientalists or Indologists.<sup>3</sup> This study arose principally because the East

1. Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India 1615-1619*, ed. W. Foster (London, 1926).

2. *Voyages de F. Bernier* . . . (Amsterdam, 1699).

3. The term Orientalist was used in the wider sense of scholars interested in Asia, and

India Company required that its officers, in order to administer properly the territories which it had acquired, become familiar with the laws, habits, and history of the people they were governing. Thus William Jones as a judge in the Presidency of Bengal was able to devote time to the study of Sanskrit and philology of the Indo-European languages and to work on the pre-British legal systems. Nevertheless, scholars such as William Jones, Charles Wilkins, H. T. Colebrooke, and H. H. Wilson did also have a genuine interest in the culture of India and would probably have sustained this interest without the incentive of being administrators in India. Because of this their work took them beyond the codification of laws and into the realms of classical Sanskrit literature and the study of religion and philosophy. In order to encourage this research and provide a focus for it, the Asiatic Society was founded in 1784. By the middle of the nineteenth century Orientalists were no longer merely the people who had direct contact with India through the East India Company. Interest in the ancient past of India had by then spread to a number of universities in Europe, with scholars working on Sanskrit and related subjects. Some of the best known of such so-called Orientalists and Indologists had never even visited India, a case in point being Max Müller.

For the Orientalists, the most significant discovery was that of the relationship between Sanskrit and certain European languages, which led to subsequent work on the common Indo-European heritage. The ancient Indian past was seen almost as a lost wing of early European culture, and the Aryans of India were regarded as the nearest intellectual relatives of the Europeans. There was an emphasis on the study of Sanskrit, since it was believed to belong to a period earlier than that of Greek and thus to be in a purer state of preservation; it therefore provided a better understanding of all Indo-European languages. A sharp distinction was made between the speakers of Aryan and non-Aryan languages in the sub-continent, and a variety of noble virtues were attributed to the Aryans. This, incidentally, strengthened the indigenous tradition of acclaiming the Sanskritic traits of Indian culture, and not surprisingly the writings of the Orientalists are frequently quoted by members of various nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movements such as the Arya Samaj. The heritage of Sanskrit literature was the emphasis upon a totally different set of values from those current in Europe. As Max Müller put it: "not the active, combative and acquisitive, but the passive, meditative and reflective."<sup>4</sup> The Indian past was seen as an unchanging society where the village community was the idyllic center of Indian life and was, in fact, the natural background for the qualities of gentleness, passivity, truthfulness, and

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the term Indologist referred to those interested only in India. However, the more generally used term even for the latter was "Orientalists," and it has been used in this sense here.

4. *India, What Can It Teach Us?* (London, 1883), 101.

other-worldliness — qualities associated by Westerners with Indians. If the Orientalists tended to exaggerate the virtues they saw in Indian society, it was in part because they were searching for a distant Utopia to escape from the bewildering changes taking place in nineteenth-century Europe, and in part to counteract the highly critical attitudes current among Utilitarian thinkers in Britain, from whose ranks came more influential writing on India.

No sustained attempt was made to place the source material in the context of its contemporary background. The sources, particularly those in Sanskrit, were in the main the works of the brahmins, as keepers of the ancient classical tradition, and expressed the brahmanical *Weltanschauung*. The fact that these were texts emanating from and relating to a particular segment of society was often overlooked, though in fairness to the Orientalists it must be said that the critical and analytical study of literature from other classical cultures was still in its infancy. The reliance on “pandits,” those learned in Sanskrit and supposedly the guardians of the ancient tradition, was not the most reliable — although undoubtedly the most convenient — access to ancient history. Many of the contemporary ideological prejudices of the pandits were often incorporated into what was believed to be the interpretation of the ancient tradition. This vitiated the study of “ancient culture,” particularly the section of it which was concerned with the law-books and legal codes, the *dharmashastras*.

It was largely due to the enthusiasm of the Orientalists that translations of Indian literature and of philosophical works became popular with intellectuals in Europe and even America. As early as 1791 Thomas Jefferson, who had known William Jones in Paris, sent a copy of Kalidasa’s play *Shakuntala* (which had been recently translated into English by Jones) to his daughter, to introduce her to classical Indian literature which he so greatly admired in what was available in translation at the time. The admiration of the poets of the German Romantic movement was even greater, as is evident from the remarks of Frederick Schlegel.<sup>5</sup> Goethe’s eulogy on *Shakuntala* can hardly bear quoting again, it is quoted so often. Schopenhauer’s interest in the philosophy of the *Upanishads* is equally well known. Much of this enthusiasm was, however, limited to literary circles and did not make the required impact on historians. Philosophers of history such as Hegel took little notice of this literature.

The first important history of India did not come from the Orientalists, but from a totally different source. In 1817, James Mill published his *History of British India*, a lengthy work divided into three major sections: Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization, and the British period. For Mill the principal value of a culture was the degree to which it contributed to the furtherance

5. E.g., “Im Orient müssen wir das Höchste Romantische suchen.”

of rationalism and individualism. He saw neither of these two values in Hindu civilization and therefore condemned it severely. He was unwilling to make any of the concessions which the Orientalists had made and continued to make. He also maintained that Indian society had remained substantially unchanged from the period of its origin, the coming of the Aryans, until the arrival of the British. Furthermore, Indian civilization showed no great concern for political values, for the Indian people had been ruled by a series of despotic and tyrannical rulers until the coming of the British. His division of Indian history into three periods — the Hindu, the Muslim, and the British — became the accepted periodization of Indian history and has remained so, with marginal modification, to the present day.<sup>6</sup> Mill was a firm believer in the Utilitarian principle that legislation can improve a society. In the Indian context this belief implied that British administrators in applying legislation could change India from a traditional, unchanging society to a progressive and dynamic society, “tradition” and “progress” being defined in Utilitarian terms. That the new legislation was totally without roots in the Indian social system and would be regarded as an imposition did not unduly disturb Mill.

Mill's history became the standard work on India and remained so for many decades. Even H. H. Wilson, who was generally much more sympathetic to the early period of Indian history, was content to add a critical commentary in the form of footnotes to a later edition of Mill's *History* and did not think it necessary to write a fresh work contradicting some of Mill's out-of-date statements. Mill was a radical in the British context, and, as was the case with quite a few other radicals of this period, he tended to exaggerate the conservatism and backwardness of India in order to accentuate his own radicalism.

The Utilitarians were not the only group who saw pre-British Indian history as being almost totally without virtue. A similar position had been taken by the Evangelicals, as for example in the writings of Charles Grant,<sup>7</sup> although their motives for this position were different from those of the Utilitarians. Whereas Mill was concerned with changing India through legislation, the Evangelicals wished to do it through conversion to Christianity. Not unexpectedly, the Evangelicals concentrated on trying to prove that the essential backwardness of India, as they saw it, was due to the Hindu religion.

Mill's assertion that the Indian past had been that of an unchanging, static society dominated by despotic rulers was reflected in various philosophies of history current in the nineteenth century. The most influential of these with

6. The periodization of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, which is generally accepted by most historians of India and by most universities teaching Indian history, is basically the same as that of Mill, since the Ancient period usually ends with the establishment of Muslim dynasties and the Medieval period with the acquisition of political power by the East India Company.

7. Charles Grant, *Observations on the State of Society* . . . (London, 1813).

respect to Indian history were the works of Hegel.<sup>8</sup> For Hegel, of course, true history involved dialectical change and development. Indian history remained stationary and fixed and therefore outside the stream of world history. The basis of Indian society was the immutable pattern of the Indian village, inhabited by a people totally unconcerned with political relationships. This permitted not only despotic rulers but also frequent conquests and continual subjugation. The static character of Indian society with its concomitant despotic rulers became an accepted truth of Indian history. The concept of Oriental Despotism began to take shape.

This concept was not new to European thinking on Asia. Its roots can perhaps be traced to the writings of Herodotus, to the Greco-Persian antagonism in the ancient world, and to the pronouncements of Aristotle on the nature of kingship and political systems in Asia. It was taken up and developed into a political theory by Montesquieu in *L'Esprit des lois*, and this theory was debated by the French Physiocrats and by Voltaire, who found it unacceptable. But the concept became established in the nineteenth century when it was introduced into various philosophies of history and was thus given intellectual legitimacy. In the case of India the primary reason given for the rise of Oriental Despotism was the belief that there was no private property in land in pre-British India. This belief was based on a misunderstanding of the agrarian system of the Mughal empire by both Thomas Roe and François Bernier.<sup>9</sup>

Hegel's philosophy of history influenced yet another interpretation of Indian history. Christian Lassen, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, applied the dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis — applied by Hegel to the phases of Greek, Roman, and Christian civilization in Europe — to India, where the three phases became Hindu, Muslim, and Christian civilization.<sup>10</sup> Lassen tried in this way to connect Indian history with the general stream of world history in the common synthesis of Christian civilization. In addition, this idea further strengthened Mill's original periodization.

In spite of applying the Hegelian dialectic to his interpretation of Indian history, Lassen was unable to refute Hegel's assumption concerning the unchanging nature of India's past. This assumption was taken up by Marx and worked into the thesis on the Asiatic Mode of Production.<sup>11</sup> Marx used as sources the information supplied by administrators and other officers employed by the British-Indian government and the Parliamentary Reports. Unfortunately neither he nor Engels worked on this theory in great detail; the Asiatic

8. *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* [1837].

9. G. Lichtheim, "Marx and the Asiatic Mode of Production," *St. Antony's Papers* 14 (1963).

10. *Indische Alterthumskunde*, 4 vols. (Bonn, Leipzig, 1847-1862).

11. *Capital*, Vol. I; *The Communist Manifesto; Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm.

Mode of Production was marginal to their main concern, which was the dialectic of European history. The sources were not only scanty but also not altogether reliable, since many of the administrators had preconceived ideas about the Indian past based on the writings of James Mill, Richard Jones, and others which were prescribed texts at Haileybury College and other such institutions where these administrators were trained. The characteristics of the Asiatic Mode of Production were: the absence of privately owned land, since all land was state-owned; the predominantly village economy, the occasional town functioning more as a military camp than as a commercial center; the nearly self-sufficient nature of this village economy with each isolated village meeting its agricultural needs and manufacturing essential goods; the lack of much surplus for exchange after the collection of a large percentage of the surplus by the State; the complete subjugation of the village communities to the State, made possible by state control of major public works, most importantly irrigation. The extraction of a maximum percentage of the surplus from the village communities enabled the despotic ruler to live in considerable luxury.

The emphasis on village communities and despotic rulers continued to haunt the writing of Indian history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the historians of this period were administrators who were convinced that the pattern of British administration was acting as a catalyst in changing Indian society for the better.<sup>12</sup> Source material pertaining to the ancient period of Indian history was now interpreted to fit these preconceptions, as, for example, in the writings of Henry Maine on ancient law and on early village communities in India.<sup>13</sup> In analyzing the reasons for the static quality of Indian society, historians generally criticized the institution of caste. The theoretical ideal of the caste system as a rigid social system, as implied in the ancient law-books, *dharma-shastras*, was accepted as an actual description of a caste society, in spite of the fact that many of these writers were intimately concerned with rural administration, where discrepancies between the theoretical description of the caste system and its actual working were obvious.<sup>14</sup> The disinclination to look for change in the Indian past was also strengthened by the thinking of social and cultural evolutionists, for whom unfamiliar societies were rejects of the linear movement toward progress. Attempts were therefore made to fit Indian society into the uniform scheme of evolution which was current in the late nineteenth century. Obviously, it would be easier to fit an atypical society into such a scheme if it could be assumed that such a society had always been static.

An interesting contrast to British historiography of India can be seen in

12. E.g., in the works of F. J. Stephen, J. Strachey, A. Lyall.

13. H. Maine, *Ancient Law* (London, 1861); *Village Communities East and West* (London, 1871).

14. This is best seen in the works of W. W. Hunter and J. Talboys Wheeler.

German and French writing on India. These scholars were not writing under the shadow of administrative duties and governmental policy, and their comprehension of the Indian past was significantly different. The keynote to this understanding was struck by Auguste Comte, who was generally sympathetic to the early Indian tradition,<sup>15</sup> partially due to the influence of the Orientalists but also due to the interest of French and German sociological thought in the nature of industrialization and its relation to social organization. One expression of this interest was the study of societies with an ideological base believed to be totally different from that of contemporary Europe, exemplified by Max Weber's work on India.<sup>16</sup> The culmination of this avenue of thought can be seen in the presuppositions of a recent French study of Indian society and culture, Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*. Dumont maintains that the basic misunderstanding of Indian culture arose from the fact that an essentially hierarchically ordered culture was studied by persons committed to an egalitarian ordering of society, who were consequently unable to comprehend the society they were studying. Dumont's contention is open to question. What is interesting, however, is that this kind of conceptual framework for the study of Indian culture and history did not emerge from British writing on early India. Not only was British sociological thinking different, but in the specific case of India the exigencies of administration impinged on historical understanding. What the French made of the history of their own colonies is quite another story.<sup>17</sup>

The idea that the British administration brought to an end the tradition of oppressive despots is a basic belief in the writings of perhaps the best known of the administrator historians, Vincent Smith.<sup>18</sup> He devoted himself especially to the study of ancient India and combined in his scholarship both more advanced techniques of historical reconstruction and a clearly defined interpretation. Smith's historical training was in European classical scholarship. He was enthusiastic about the activities of the ancient Greeks and took their achievements to be the yardstick by which to measure all civilizations. His pro-Greek bias is shown in attempts to suggest that the finer qualities of Indian civilization were derived from Greece.<sup>19</sup> He was equally impressed by the grand sweep of Roman history as presented by Gibbon. Heroes and empires were the sub-

15. Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, ed. H. Martineau (n.p., 1853) II, 238. Comte was greatly appreciated by nineteenth-century Indian intellectuals, and his writing was a formative element in some aspects of Indian thinking during this period. An interesting analysis of this has recently been made by S. Gopal in a course of lectures delivered at Oxford (1968) on "The Intellectual Origins of Indian Nationalism."

16. *The Religion of India* (English trans., Glencoe, Ill., 1958).

17. J. Chesneaux, "French Historiography and the Evolution of Colonial Viet-nam," in *Historians of South East Asia*, ed. D. G. E. Hall (London, 1961), 235 ff.

18. *Early History of India* (Oxford, 1904); *Oxford History of India* (Oxford 1919).

19. E.g., *Early History of India* (4th ed., Oxford, 1924), 442.



ject matter of history; and, furthermore, only those who had survived successfully were worth consideration. Thus Ashoka, Chandragupta II, and Akbar became his heroes and their reigns the glorious periods of Indian history. The intervening periods of small kingdoms he saw as periods of anarchy and misrule, since they failed to produce emperors; and in his interpretation of Indian history, these became the dark ages. Smith's depiction of the rise and fall of empires and the intervening dark ages did weaken the idea of a totally unchanging society, even if the change was largely limited to the upper sections of society.

Vincent Smith and his contemporaries writing on India were in a sense reflecting the main trend of British historical writing of the time. It is perhaps as well to remember that in the late nineteenth century British historians studying Britain also were focusing attention on "great men." As has been recently observed: "History was more conveniently interpreted as the interaction between great men and the institutions they created, modified or restored."<sup>20</sup> Charles Kingsley in his inaugural lecture as professor of history at Cambridge in 1861 had stated that: "the new science of little men can be no science at all; because the average man is not the normal man, and never yet has been; because the great man is rather the normal man, as approaching more nearly than his fellows to the true "norma" and standard of a complete human character . . . to turn to the mob for your theory of humanity is (I think) about as wise as to ignore the Apollo and the Theseus and to determine the proportions of the human figure from a crowd of dwarfs and cripples." This sentiment was preëminent for many decades in British historical writing.

Smith's studies of ancient Indian history present, nevertheless, a considerable advance over earlier writings on the same subject, because a significant new body of evidence was available. Apart from the work on the literary sources, there developed in the later nineteenth century an interest in the antiquities of India. The objects and the information collected constituted the beginnings of archaeology in India. James Prinsep had deciphered the *brahmi* script in 1837, thus opening up the epigraphical sources. Alexander Cunningham began a systematic study of monuments, which became the nucleus of art-history. The exploration of archaeological sites laid the foundation not only for archaeological work but also for an interest in historical geography, which in turn encouraged local history. The study of numismatics, originally inspired by the extension of the study of Greek coins to those in India, became a source of fresh evidence. Surveys of local castes, customs, religious practices, and languages served to advance the cause of antiquarian interests. By the early twentieth century, there was a sizeable amount of non-literary evidence to com-

20. G. Stedman-Jones, "The Pathology of English History," in *The New Left Review* 46 (1967).

plement the written sources.<sup>21</sup> But the former tradition of antiquarian writing continued, and these new sources were used largely to increase the quantum of evidence, with few attempts at analyzing the material. The main concern of historians writing on ancient India was still with political and dynastic history for which fresh information was available from the epigraphic and numismatic evidence.

It was also about this time that Indian historians first began writing on ancient Indian history, the most eminent among them being R. G. Bhandarkar.<sup>22</sup> At this stage they did not have any new perspective on Indian history, but followed the models set by British historians. Historical writing was mainly a narrative of dynastic and political history or else work of a largely antiquarian interest in fact-finding. Bhandarkar, though recognizing the deficiencies of the sources as historical material, was also aware of the more obvious prejudices of contemporary historians writing on the Indian past. Incidentally, it is interesting to observe that many of the early writers came from brahman and *kayastha* families, largely because they were the ones who had the quickest access to a knowledge of the required classical language. The cultural background of Indian historians tended to inhibit a critical or analytical study of the sources. However, their hesitation to question the model put forward by British historians is linked with the larger question of the sociology of education in modern India. Subsequently the challenge arose out of nationalism and gradually acquired intellectual formulations within the discipline of history.

The following generation of Indian historians, however, differed from their elders in one fundamental assumption. Historians writing in the 1920's and 1930's felt the impact of the national movement, and this was reflected in their historical thinking. Historians such as H. C. Raychaudhuri, K. P. Jayaswal, R. C. Majumdar, R. K. Mookerjee, and H. C. Ojha, among others, continued to write political and dynastic history in the main, but their interpretations were based on a clearly nationalistic point of view.<sup>23</sup> There was an unashamed glorification of the ancient Indian past. This was in part a reaction to the criticism of Mill and other writers and in part a necessary step in the building of national self-respect. The glorious past was also a compensation for the humiliating present. To some extent the glorification of the past represented a revival of interest in the writings of the more sympathetic

21. Cunningham was appointed Archaeological Surveyor in 1892. It was, however, not until 1901 that the Archaeological Survey of India received a real boost owing to the interest of the then viceroy, Lord Curzon.

22. *The Early History of the Dekkan* ([Bombay], 1894); *A Peep into the Early History of India* (Bombay, 1920).

23. H. C. Raychaudhuri, *The Political History of Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1923); K. P. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity* (Calcutta, 1924); R. K. Mookerji, *Harsha* (London, 1926); H. C. Ojha, *Rajputānā-kāitihāsa* (Banaras, 1925-1941).

Orientalists; and, not surprisingly, eulogistic quotations from Max Müller, for instance, were given as proof of disinterested European opinion of India's past.

Ancient Indian society was visualized by these writers as a comparatively unchanging society over the period from 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000 with a uniformly high quality of achievement; the basis of this stability was the ancient Aryan culture. It was felt that nineteenth-century historians had belittled the achievements of ancient India by, among other things, denying its antiquity and by suggesting that its achievements were borrowed mainly from Greece. There was an attempt, therefore, to place literary sources as early in time as was reasonably feasible and to prove that the more worthwhile aspects of Indian culture were entirely indigenous.<sup>24</sup> To counter the argument that the Indian tradition lacked a concern for the rational and the pragmatic, it was maintained that Indian culture had an essentially spiritual quality which was totally opposed to that of the essentially materialistic Western civilization. It followed that in essence Indian culture was superior.

Another characteristic of historical interpretation influenced by nationalism was the desire to stress the political unity of the country from earliest times. Thus the rise of the Mauryan empire in the third century B.C. and its extension over almost the entire sub-continent was seen as an expression of an all-India consciousness.<sup>25</sup> The earlier emphasis of Smith on empires as the relevant periods of study was therefore continued, but for different reasons. References to imperial glory gave rise to a sense of pride in the past and strengthened the ideology of nationhood. The term "empire" continued to be applied to the large north Indian kingdoms, and the geographical perspective was that of the Ganges heartland. In spite of this geographical focus there was no lack of generalization embracing the entire sub-continent.

Some of the generalizations now appear to be self-contradictory, but clearly they were not so regarded at the time. For example, whereas on the one hand non-violence was regarded as a distinguishing feature of Indian culture, there was at the same time a glorification of military power. For some, Ashoka's policy of non-violence was his greatest achievement; other historians found this the major criticism of him, arguing that he so weakened the defense of India that the northwestern part of the sub-continent was conquered with ease

24. It was suggested that perhaps the Aryans did not migrate from an Indo-European homeland but were in fact of Indian origin and therefore by extension the Indo-European homeland may have been in India. In view of the cultural importance of the revival of interest in Vedic culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India, this theory was extremely popular. It has since been taken up by some recent historians who maintain that not only were the Aryans and their culture entirely indigenous to India and therefore spread from South Asia to West Asia, but that the Vedic period is pre-Harappan.

25. *The Age of the Nandas and Mauryas*, ed. Nilakanta Sastri (Banaras, 1952).

by foreign invaders.<sup>26</sup> The adulation of Chandragupta Maurya or the flattering comparisons of Samudragupta with Napoleon were all based on pride in the military prowess of these rulers.

Historians such as Vincent Smith, W. W. Tarn, and others came under attack because of their theories concerning the widespread influence of Greek culture on Indian culture.<sup>27</sup> A determined attempt was made to prove that Indian civilization did not lack any of the laudable qualities ascribed to the Greeks. Thus Jayaswal maintained that the political life of the ancient Indian republics had been based on the concepts of democracy and representative government to the same degree as had the political life of the Greek city-states.<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, A. K. Coomaraswami argued against the aesthetic superiority of Greek art, since the Greeks were obsessed with physical beauty whereas the Indian artists sought to express higher spiritual values in their work.<sup>29</sup> It was this quality in Indian art which made it aesthetically unappealing to the Western viewers.

The nationalist historians were writing at a time when the leaders of the national movement were demanding political rights and political representation in the government. Understandably, therefore, the political life and institutions of the past were probably the most sensitive areas of disagreement with earlier historians. The discovery and interpretation of the *Artha shastra*, a work on political economy, was, for instance, a form of exoneration from the charge that Indian society was unconcerned with political relationships.<sup>30</sup> Hence the frequent comparisons of the text with the writings of Machiavelli and the ideas of Bismarck, or, for that matter, the comparison of the *mantriparishad* as described by Kautilya with the Privy Council of Britain,<sup>31</sup> and the suggestion that the Kautilyan monarch was similar to the constitutional monarch of Britain.<sup>32</sup> It would seem that in matters relating to political history and institutions the values current in European thought were accepted and their equivalents sought in the Indian past.

In spite of such weaknesses the nationalist historians played a very significant role in the interpretation of ancient Indian history. Because they wrote in conscious opposition to the earlier writing, they forced historians to take a fresh look at the sources. They raised controversies, and a debate began. The

26. Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India*, 363.

27. Theories regarding Greek influences on Indian culture have been challenged by Indians from the 1870's onward, but in a rather sporadic way. Now the challenge was formulated in the more academic form of historical argument.

28. This is maintained in his *Hindu Polity*.

29. *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (London, 1927); *The Dance of Siva* (New York, 1918).

30. H. Voigt, *St. Antony's Papers* 8.

31. R. C. Majumdar, *Corporate Life in Ancient India* (Poona, 1966), 126-127.

32. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity* II, 60 ff.

recognition of an historian's conceptual framework became meaningful. The interpretation of Indian history was no longer based on a monolithic ideology deriving authority from the concept of Oriental Despotism. Furthermore, the study of the ancient past began to have relevance for the present, and historical writing had to be more than the antiquarian's collection of facts. Although most of the historical writing was still confined to dynastic history, the debate on ancient political and cultural life necessitated the study of social and economic history.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly enough, although a fair amount of work had been done by this time on, for example, caste and religious groups, historians rarely integrated the results of this work into their histories; thus bibliographies of sections entitled "Society" in most standard histories would refer to Altekar's book *The Position of Women in Ancient India* or N. K. Dutta's *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*, both merely compilations of references to the subject from the literary source material, but would rarely mention any of the standard works on the study of caste or social institutions. (That the system of placing various facets of history in water-tight compartments neatly labelled Political History, Economic History, Society, Religion and Philosophy, Language and Literature, the Arts, etc., continues to this day can be seen in the most standard of all standard histories, the series entitled, "The History and Culture of the Indian People.")

There was a tendency to regard the ancient period as one of considerable prosperity and general contentment, in fact a period of which the Indian people could justifiably be proud. This was legitimate for its purposes except on occasions when there was a reluctance to admit to blemishes on the culture. Mill's periodization was accepted without much questioning, and a very sharp distinction was drawn between the Hindu/Ancient and the Muslim/Medieval periods. This distinction was emphasized by the rather arbitrary association of the most acceptable achievements of the Indian past with Hindu culture. Not surprisingly, nationalism was replaced by a form of militant Hinduism, and the communal atmosphere in Indian politics in the late 1930's and the 1940's tended to vitiate the study of ancient and medieval history. The Gupta period became the "Golden Age" largely because it was the period of renascent Hinduism. Many of the ills of India were ascribed to "the Muslim invasions and rule." It was maintained that Hinduism in its Sanskrit form was the essential culture of India, and other forces were in a sense an intrusion. The identification of ancient India with Hindu culture became so marked that even the Buddhists were regarded with some suspicion. Earlier attempts at proving the indigenous origin of all things Indian were accentuated, a trend which

33. Beni Prasad, *The State in Ancient India* (Allahabad, 1928); A. S. Altekar, *A History of Village Communities in Western India* (Bombay, 1927); U. N. Ghoshal, *History of Hindu Political Theories* (London, 1927); *The Agrarian System in Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1930); P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra* (Poona, 1930).

continues to be supported by certain historians to this day. At another level, it was believed that the dynamics of many Asian cultures, particularly those of Southeast Asia, arose from Hindu culture, and the theory of Greater India derived sustenance from Pan-Hinduism. A curious pride was taken in the supposed imperialist past of India, as expressed in sentiments such as these: "The art of Java and Kambuja was no doubt derived from India and fostered by the Indian *rulers* of these *colonies*."<sup>34</sup> (Italics mine.) This form of historical interpretation, which can perhaps best be described as being inspired by Hindu nationalism, remains an influential school of thinking in present historical writings.<sup>35</sup>

From the historical point of view a more valuable offshoot of the nationalist school was the growth of interest in regional and local histories. Studies of regional histories of smaller geographical areas and states — such as histories of Bengal, Maharashtra, and various parts of the peninsula — became more common.<sup>36</sup> This was a useful departure because it corrected the tendency to generalize about the entire Indian sub-continent on the basis of the history of the Ganges heartland. It led to the discovery of new source material in local archives and to greater archaeological work in the region. The results of these studies not only filled many lacunae in historical knowledge of the early period but also acted as a corrective to some of the earlier generalizations. It also led to the recognition of the fact that an area as large as the Indian sub-continent will show evidence of regional variations in the cultural pattern, and that historical change in the sub-continent need not be identical nor occur simultaneously. Nilakantha Sastri's work on south Indian history created a new awareness of the history of the sub-continent by bringing the history of the south into perspective.<sup>37</sup>

Another trend which was also rooted in the writings of the nationalist school, but which developed more extensively in the post-independence period, began in a marginal way with an interest in the systematic study of social organization and political and economic institutions. Some writers came to it through an interest in Marxism, as is exemplified in the work of D. D. Kosambi. For others it resulted from a recognition that history, and particularly ancient history, can best be studied within the framework of a social science discipline. The Marxists did not accept the schema implicit in the theory of the Asiatic

34. R. C. Majumdar, *Advanced History of India* (2nd. ed., London, 1950), 221.

35. This perspective is supported by certain sections of "The History and Culture of the Indian People" series.

36. R. C. Majumdar, *The Early History of Bengal* (London, 1925); A. S. Altekar, *The Rashtrakutas and Their Times* (Poona, 1934); V. R. R. Dikshitar, *Studies in Tamil Literature and History* (London, 1930).

37. *The Pandyan Kingdom* (London, 1929); *The Cholas* (Madras, 1935); *A History of South India* (Madras, 1955).

Mode of Production; their interpretations derived more from the understanding of the principles of dialectical materialism and the historical philosophy of Marx, as has frequently been the case with Asian Marxists writing their own history.<sup>38</sup> This trend has led to the study of the relationship between social and economic organization and its effect on historical events, and the development of the idea that it is the interrelation of a variety of forces which determines historical events. Kosambi stated in the *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* that he saw the means of production as the key to historical events, and his analysis of ancient Indian history is based on this. For him dynastic history had no meaning, because, apart from everything else, our information on it is of such an uncertain character. It was more important, therefore, to investigate the workings of social and economic forces. The importance of his work, however, lies not so much in the historical totality which he presented, but in the fact that it raised a number of new ideas and revealed new questions to be put to the sources, such as: To what extent can archaeological evidence provide a background to developments in historical times? Can archaeology and literary sources give us the clues to technological change? Was the economy in fact the base to the super-structure of other forces in Indian society? Can religious activities in India be studied in either Marxist or Weberian terms, or, for that matter, on the basis of any other model? Most important of all, what are the variables in the Indian tradition which distinguish it from other traditions?

Kosambi's writings became a focus and served to emphasize the validity of such questions and the need for further questions and the answers to them. This does not require a search for new evidence so much as a re-reading of the sources, with a different set of questions in mind. It also requires fresh annotations of existing texts, particularly the law-books, *dharma-shastras*. It requires not merely a familiarity with existing models but, even more important, an awareness and understanding of analytical methods. To this extent the problems in the interpretation of ancient Indian history are not totally dissimilar to problems faced by contemporary historians of other ancient cultures.

These ideas coincided with the realization that the major part of the dynastic history of ancient India had already been written and that other aspects of the historical past would now have to be investigated, not merely by compilation of more information, but also by analysis of the facts with a view to establishing causal relationships. The paucity of fresh literary source material would inevitably have led to a shift from the antiquarian interest in the ancient past

38. D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1956); R. S. Sharma, *Shudras in Ancient India* (Delhi, 1958); Deva Raj Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India* (New Delhi, 1960).

to a more analytical comprehension of it. The increasing relevance of the methodology of the social sciences facilitated this shift. Not surprisingly, the intensification of work in archaeology and anthropology has coincided with this new emphasis in ancient history.

Archaeology is now the major source of fresh evidence, since it is unlikely that large numbers of literary sources still remain to be discovered. It not only provides new evidence in the form of the material remains of past culture, but, precisely because this evidence is tangible, it allows of a more accurate reconstruction of the past. From the results of investigation into prehistory and proto-history a picture of the evolution of cultures in India is emerging.

It is now possible to trace the successive phases of cultures relating to the Palaeolithic, the Neolithic, and the Chalcolithic types. The work on the Neolithic has enabled us to map the major areas of early agriculture in the first three millennia B.C. and to trace communication links. Work on the Chalcolithic in the northern half of India has been somewhat concentrated on extensive excavations relating to the Harappa culture or the Indus Valley Civilization, as it was called until recently. The discovery of new towns and fresh evidence about the chronology and the decline of the Harappa culture necessitates a reconsideration of Mortimer Wheeler's theory that the invading Aryans destroyed the cities of the Harappans. In the Deccan, Chalcolithic traces have provided evidence of trade routes and contact between the Ganges valley and the northwest Deccan and the routes across the Deccan in the beginning of the first millennium B.C. The continued use of these routes well into the historical period opens up new possibilities of historical analyses of the early history of the Deccan. Detailed studies on the Iron Age and iron technology from various sites in the sub-continent provide interesting insights into the use and expansion of this technology. Recent carbon-14 analyses have suggested *ca.* 1100 B.C. as the date for the use of iron, which is 300 years earlier than previous dates. For the far south of India there is now archaeological evidence for the period from *ca.* 500 B.C. to A.D. 150, beginning with the Megalithic culture and continuing with a fairly highly developed Roman trade with south India. In both cases the contact is with the western end of what has been described as the "Indian Ocean Arc." The economics of the Roman trade which is now being studied on the basis of archaeological remains, coins, and literary sources in Greek, Latin, and Tamil are likely to provide some useful information on the growth of the south Indian kingdoms. The material evidence from the excavations of urban centers can corroborate or act as a corrective to literary evidence. Epigraphical evidence has illuminated many areas of post-Gupta history from the fifth century A.D. onward, particularly in the Deccan and south India. Material remains can also provide statistical evidence. Thus the quantity and distribution of the characteristic pottery of the period — the



northern-black polished ware — is very relevant to the study of communication and trade in the pre-Mauryan and Mauryan periods, the fifth to third centuries B.C.

Studies in economic and social history in recent years have attempted to determine not only the periods of change but the nature of change. In economic history this has resulted in an intensive study of the agrarian system. It can now be said that not only is there evidence to prove the existence of private property in land but also that the rule of property changed significantly over the centuries. This disproves the basic premise of the argument in support of the theory of Oriental Despotism as applied to India. The major contribution in this area has been the study of land grants reconstructed from epigraphical sources, on the basis of which it has been suggested that a gradual change took place in the agrarian system from the fourth century A.D. onward, resulting in what has been called a feudal society by about the seventh to the eighth century A.D.<sup>39</sup> Related to this is the question of the changing forms of land-ownership and the varieties of private property. Various aspects of the revenue system have also been reconsidered in the light of new interpretations of forms of ownership. These studies have a bearing on the nature of the bureaucracy. Epigraphical material is frequently used as a means of checking the evidence from literary sources. The use of inscriptions for such studies is comparatively new, since earlier historians tended to use inscriptions largely for information on dynastic history. Archaeology provides evidence for the study of trade and the growth of towns in the context of a well-developed commercial economy, and here again the material remains have been used effectively in correlation with literary sources. This is an area of study for which there is immense scope with fresh excavations of trade centers and townsites.

Indian social history at the moment has one basic preoccupation: an inquiry into the precise nature of social relationships in the structure of early Indian society.<sup>40</sup> Such an inquiry meets with obvious problems because of the nature of the literary source material. Attempts are being made at re-examining the texts in the light of our contemporary understanding of the theoretical model of the caste system, *varna*. These inquiries have taken the form of investigating a particular social group, for example the studies on the Shudras or on the Vratyas, or the interrelationships of groups in a particular period, or the nature of an institution known to other societies as well, for example, slavery. The social and economic underpinnings of religious institutions provide yet

39. R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism* (Calcutta, 1965).

40. Sociological studies such as I. Karve, *Hindu Society — an Interpretation* (Poona, 1961); and M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (Bombay, 1962) have helped to create an interest in this kind of investigation.

another avenue of related interest, the studies of the Chola temples being a case in point.

The nationalist phase also saw considerable interest in the study of ancient Indian political theory. The dominant themes were the status and role of the king, the channels of political representation, the function of the bureaucracy, and the distribution of power. The understanding of the theory of kingship in ancient India had been colored in the nineteenth century by the concept of the divinity of kingship, based on the evidence from the Ancient Near East. This concept was rather arbitrarily extended to Indian kingship, together with the political corollary of a lack of representative institutions and the concentration of power with the king. Although the nationalist historians did attempt to refute the latter, they rather overlooked the question of the divinity of the king. This theme has come into prominence in recent work on the nature of kingship and the distribution of political power and status in early Indian society.<sup>41</sup> The question of the distribution of political power is being re-examined in the framework of the functioning of a caste society, and with reference to the existing evidence on institutions of local control, such as village councils. The work on the land-grants, particularly from the sixth century onward, suggests a different type of power structure for the bureaucracy than was previously assumed on the basis of the theory of despotism. The exclusion of straight political history is not for all time. There are indications of a more meaningful return to political history now that the background of social and economic history is being gradually filled in.

The nationalist phase of historical interpretation led for obvious reasons to the overwhelming participation of Indian historians in writing their own history. This seemed to coincide with an appreciable decline of interest in ancient Indian history by European Indologists, except in France. The more recent interpretations of ancient Indian history have suggested methods of analysis which can be used by historians of any nationality and can circumvent national and ideological bias, and by the use of which a greater degree of objectivity in interpretation can be achieved.<sup>42</sup> Even if history is based on selected data, the data selected need not be entirely arbitrary. These methods work within the framework of certain hypotheses. They assume that all societies change and that in a period stretching from 2500 B.C. to A.D. 1000 Indian society and its institutions must have undergone change; it is the work of the historian to

41. C. Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community in Early India* (Stanford, 1962).

42. The work of non-Indian scholars such as A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (London, 1954) is widely accepted in Indian historical circles. During the 1930's and the 1940's the major contributions of non-Indian scholars to the early history of India came from France in the work of Louis de la Valle Poussin, *L'Inde aux temps des Mauryas . . .* ([Paris], 1930); *Dynasties et histoire de l'Inde . . .* (Paris, 1935); and L. Renou, *La Civilisation de l'Inde ancienne* ([Paris], 1950); and L. Renou and J. Filliozat, *L'Inde classique* (Paris, 1947).

study the nature of this change. The idea of a static society is clearly no longer tenable.<sup>43</sup>

This raises the crucial question of periodization in Indian history. Clearly there is a need to redefine the various periods of Indian history, if periodization is necessary, or else to dispense with such divisions altogether. The earliest pattern of periodization, that of the Hindu-Muslim-British periods of Indian history, gives undue importance to ruling dynasties and foreign invasions and is based, presumably, on the professed religions of the dynasties of northern India. In many cases it was merely the dynasty which changed, for the major historical characteristics of one period continued into the next. The change in terminology to Ancient-Medieval-Modern does not clarify the problem if the basis for the division remains the same. The Ancient/Hindu period is traditionally accepted as terminating with the Muslim conquest. Yet "the Muslims" conquered various parts of India at different periods in time. The Arabs conquered Sind in the eighth century; the Turks and Afghans conquered the Punjab at the end of the tenth, northern India in the thirteenth, and the Deccan in the fourteenth century. The history of the area further south, with its alternating Hindu and Muslim dynasties, does not fit this pattern of periodization in any case. The arbitrary choice of A.D. 1000 seeks to impose a pattern which the evidence does not permit. If the basis of periodization were to be significant social and economic changes, then the Ancient period would end roughly in the eighth century A.D., or possibly a little earlier, since the more significant changes did not coincide with dynastic changes and the conquests of "the Muslims." Although an improvement on the earlier pattern in historical terms, even this pattern of periodization could not be applied to every part of the sub-continent.

Perhaps the most significant result of the work done on ancient Indian history so far is the realization that well-defined phases of historical development are not uniformly applicable to the history of every society, and that the historian's interpretation should be the outcome of a search for the phases of historical development within a given society, which can then be analytically compared with other phases in other societies. This is not to deny the legitimacy of historical generalizations, but to recognize the variable factors and to demand a more precise definition of historical formulations.

*Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford*

43. A recent attempt to revive this thesis has been made by K. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven, 1957).