



E-ISSN: 2706-9117  
P-ISSN: 2706-9109  
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.63  
[www.historyjournal.net](http://www.historyjournal.net)  
IJH 2025; 7(8): 115-122  
Received: 20-06-2025  
Accepted: 14-07-2025

**Prem Kumar Sharma**  
Assistant Professor,  
Himalayan University,  
Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh,  
India

## Historical writings in ancient India and its historiography: An analysis

**Prem Kumar Sharma**

**DOI:** <http://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2025.v7.i8b.500>

### Abstract

The article interrogates the colonial assertion that ancient India lacked historical consciousness, a notion rooted in the critiques of thinkers like Al-Beruni, James Mill, Hegel, and Macaulay. By examining the evolution of this critique and contrasting it with indigenous historiographical traditions, ranging from the *Itihasa-Purana* corpus and royal genealogies to professional storytellers, Buddhist and Jain chronicles, and inscriptional evidence, the study exposes the limitations and ideological motives of colonial and Eurocentric frameworks. The analysis is grounded in the methodologies and findings of key modern Indian historians, including Romila Thapar, D.D. Kosambi and R.S. Sharma reveal that Indian traditions demonstrated sophisticated, culturally specific forms of recording and interpreting the past. The article establishes that rather than indicating a deficiency, India's multifaceted historiographical practices reflected distinct intellectual environments, values, and approaches to history. The major conclusion is that the myth of India's "ahistoricity" was a construct serving colonial domination, and that contemporary scholarship, supported by textual, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence, now recognises the richness, complexity, and validity of ancient Indian historical traditions on their terms.

**Keywords:** Historiography, ancient India, colonial historians, philosophy of history

### Introduction

Historiography refers to how history is written, understood, and preserved. It is fundamentally the study of the methods used by historians in developing history as an academic discipline, and by extension, anybody of historical work on a particular subject. Rather than simply being the study of past events themselves, historiography examines how history has been written, by whom, and what factors influenced its recording over time. It can be most simply defined as "the history of history", representing a meta-analytical approach to understanding how historical knowledge is constructed and interpreted.

While history refers to the actual study of past events, particularly those relating to human affairs, historiography focuses on the study of written histories and how historical interpretations shift over time. When studying historiography, scholars do not examine the past directly, but rather analyse the changing interpretations of past events through different historians' perspectives.

In the Indian context, ancient historiography is a subject of both fascination and debate. Unlike the Western tradition, which developed explicit historiographical methods with figures such as Herodotus and Thucydides, Indian historiography evolved in a unique cultural and intellectual environment. It blended mythology, religion, philosophy, and memory with historical consciousness. Scholars have often debated whether India had "true history" in the Western sense, but a closer examination reveals a rich and distinctive tradition of recording the past.

Ancient Indian historiography cannot be studied as a singular, uniform tradition. It was multifaceted, expressed through epics, Puranas, inscriptions, Buddhist and Jain chronicles, dynastic records, and travelogues. It reflected a society deeply concerned with time, cosmic cycles, genealogy, kingship, moral lessons, and dharma (righteousness). These sources, though different from Western historical annals, reveal systematic ways of preserving the past, constructing collective memory, and linking human activity with cosmic order.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Prem Kumar Sharma**  
Assistant Professor,  
Himalayan University,  
Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh,  
India

### Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, historiographical methodology grounded in critical textual analysis. The study integrates close reading of texts with comparative analysis, contrasting Indian traditions with Western historiographical models to highlight methodological differences and cultural specificity. Colonial-era writings were critically assessed to trace the construction and perpetuation of the "lack of historical sense" thesis. In parallel, the research reviews contributions from key modern Indian historians to foreground indigenous perspectives and methodological innovations. Throughout, the study adopts a decolonial perspective, seeking to identify ideological biases in earlier interpretations while validating plural, culturally contextual modes of historical consciousness. Thus, it is a comparative source analysis to construct a nuanced understanding of ancient Indian historiography.

### Ancient Indian historiography and the lack of historical sense

The question of historical consciousness in ancient India represents one of the most contentious debates in Indian historiography. Western scholars, beginning with Al-Beruni in 1030 CE and continuing through colonial and post-colonial periods, have consistently argued that ancient Indians lacked a proper sense of history and chronology. However, this assessment has been increasingly challenged by modern scholarship that recognises the complexity and sophistication of India's historical traditions.

The allegation that ancient Indians possessed no historical sense originated with Al-Beruni, who in his *Tarikh-al-Hind* (1030 CE) observed that "The Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings, and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling". This critique was paradoxical, considering that Al-Beruni himself relied on Puranic records with proper genealogies and chronological sequences for his historical work.

The colonial period intensified this criticism. Vincent Smith, a British civil servant and influential historian, argued that most Sanskrit works were composed by Brahmins who had no interest in writing history, preferring other pursuits. A. B. Keith lamented the "miserable representation" of history in Sanskrit literature, claiming there was not a single author in the entire great period who could be recognized as a serious critical historian. Similarly, J. W. McCrindle held that Indians themselves did not write history, producing voluminous and varied literature but conspicuously lacking historical works. These colonial narratives served ideological purposes. It portrayed British rule as bringing historical consciousness to a civilisation that supposedly lacked it in the past, thereby justifying colonial intervention as historically necessary. The British presented themselves as rescuing and preserving India's heritage in ways that Indians themselves had allegedly failed to accomplish.

### James Mill and the utilitarian denunciation

James Mill's monumental work *The History of British India* (1817) <sup>[12]</sup> represents perhaps the most systematic and influential colonial critique of Indian civilisation, including its alleged lack of historical sense. Mill, remarkably, had never visited India and knew none of the Indian languages,

yet he claimed this improved his work's "moral objective". His approach was fundamentally shaped by the Utilitarian school of thought, which made scathing criticisms of Indian culture in its entirety.

Mill arbitrarily divided Indian history into three periods, Hindu, Muslim, and British - based primarily on the religion of the ruling class. This periodisation had far-reaching consequences for how Indian history was subsequently understood and taught. According to his prejudiced version of Indian history, Mill presented an extremely denigrating picture of the Hindu periods. He condemned every institution, idea and action of the ancient period, or as in his words, the Hindu period and held them responsible for all the ills of the country.

In his assessment of Hindu civilisation, Mill argued that there was no evidence to support the view that Hindus were highly civilised before their subjugation by foreigners. He claimed that ancient writings like the Puranas described a state of society where there was injustice, wars, and bloodshed. He further characterised the Hindu government as a form of despotism established and confirmed by laws of Divine authority, arguing that "through the division of people into castes, a degrading system of subordination was established among Hindus". He concluded that with despotism and priestcraft combined, "Hindus, in mind and body, were the most enslaved of the human race". Mill's work became a textbook at Haileybury School in England, which educated young Englishmen coming to India as administrators and civil servants. Thus, the Utilitarian school played a very important role in shaping imperialist policy in India and the future of Indian education, with Mill's distorted history of ancient India at its core.

### Hegel's philosophy of history and Indian historical consciousness

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's contribution to the colonial critique of Indian historical consciousness was perhaps even more influential than Mill's, providing a sophisticated philosophical framework that positioned India at the most primitive stage of historical development. In his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel outlined what he called an "evolutionary typology of historical consciousness" utilising the colonial other for attributing certain stages of development to different "nations" of the world.

Hegel's analysis was fundamentally premised on his understanding of the relationship between history and national consciousness. He argued that "history is always of great importance for a people, since by means of that it becomes conscious of the path of development taken by its own spirit, which expresses itself in Laws, Manners, Customs and Deeds". According to Hegel, history serves as an essential instrument in developing rational political conditions by providing empirical methods for producing universal principles.

In Hegel's evolutionary framework, Indian historical consciousness represented a kind of childhood state of European historical consciousness. He positioned India at the very beginning of his evolutionary sequence of the development of the world spirit. Hegel's famous formulation stated: "It is because the Hindoos have no History in the form of annals (*historia*) that they have no History in the form of transactions (*res gestae*); that is, no growth expanding into a veritable political condition".

Hegel's critique was shaped by his comparison with China,

where he found historical accounts that matched his expectations of state-centred narratives. In contrast, he dismissed Indian historical accounts as "largely legendary tales about kings and dynasties, but do not contain the history of the state and the people". This assessment reflected Hegel's adherence to the European paradigm of academic history, which prioritised political and military narratives focused on state formation and national development. The philosopher's influence extended far beyond academic circles. Hegelian ideas can be found even in popular works by contemporary writers who criticised ancient Indians' alleged neglect of their past.

### **Macaulay's educational policy and cultural dismissal**

Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) <sup>[10]</sup> complemented Mill's and Hegel's philosophical critiques with practical policy recommendations that institutionalised the dismissal of Indian historical traditions. Macaulay's minute sought to establish English education as superior to traditional Indian learning, arguing that Eastern knowledge and literature were "worthless" while Western knowledge was crucial for Indian development. He declared that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia". He lampooned Indian knowledge and languages, considering them completely inadequate for modern education. His policy recommendations included making English the medium of education, organising higher education institutions for the elite class, and maintaining religious neutrality while promoting Western learning.

The minute reflected Macaulay's conviction of his own nation's superiority in sciences and arts, but his prejudiced perspective prevented him from appreciating alternative approaches to knowledge and historical understanding. Macaulay's goal was to create "a class of people, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinion, morals and intellect" effectively replacing Indian intellectual traditions with Western ones. His educational policy had lasting consequences, establishing patterns that would dominate Indian education even long after independence. The policy contributed to the decline of traditional education and created a cultural divide, alienating many Indians from their own linguistic and cultural heritage while consolidating British power through the creation of loyal cultural intermediaries.

### **The nature of ancient Indian historical traditions**

Contrary to colonial assertions, ancient India possessed sophisticated historical traditions that differed from Western models but were no less valid. The Itihasa-Purana tradition represents the cornerstone of ancient Indian historiography. This tradition encompassed the great epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) and the vast corpus of Puranic literature, which preserved genealogies, cultural practices, and historical narratives spanning millennia.

The Puranas, despite being dismissed by colonial scholars as merely mythological, contain extensive genealogical records of ruling dynasties with precise chronological sequences. These texts served multiple functions: they preserved collective memory, transmitted cultural values, and maintained historical continuity across generations. The Itihasa-Purana tradition demonstrates that ancient Indian society possessed a distinctive historical consciousness that integrated myth, memory, and factual accounts into a coherent understanding of the past.

The tradition also included works like Kautilya's Arthashastra, a sophisticated treatise on statecraft and politics from the 4th century BCE. This text reveals remarkable historical consciousness in its practical approach to governance, military strategy, and economic policy. The Arthashastra demonstrates that ancient Indian intellectuals were capable of systematic, rational analysis of political and social phenomena.

Perhaps Kalhana's Rajatarangini (1148 CE) stands as the most celebrated example of ancient Indian historical writing. This Sanskrit chronicle of Kashmir's history spans over 3,600 years and displays sophisticated historiographical methods that rival contemporary works from any civilisation. Kalhana explicitly stated his commitment to objectivity: "That noble-minded poet alone merits praise whose word, like the sentence of a judge, keeps free from love or hatred in recording the past".

Kalhana's methodological sophistication included systematic use of multiple sources, previous chronicles by eleven Kashmir historians, inscriptions, coins, monuments, family records, and eyewitness accounts. His access to contemporary court intrigues through his father, who served as a minister, provided him with detailed knowledge of political affairs. The work demonstrates remarkable concern for chronological accuracy and causal analysis of historical events.

Several factors contributed to Kashmir's development of sophisticated historical writing: its distinct geographical identity fostering regional consciousness, proximity to Central Asia and China with their historical traditions, the influence of Buddhism with its strong historiographical practices, and the turbulent political period that motivated reflection on the transience of earthly power.

### **Reconsidering the "lack of historical sense"**

Modern scholarship has fundamentally challenged the colonial narrative about Indian historical consciousness. Romila Thapar and other historians have demonstrated that the supposed absence of historical sense in ancient India resulted from applying inappropriate Western standards to Indian materials. The accusation that Indians possessed only "cyclic" rather than "linear" time concepts has been thoroughly debunked, as Indian texts demonstrate both linear chronologies in genealogies and sophisticated dating systems.

Maurice Winternitz, a German scholar, provided a more balanced assessment: "one must not believe as it has so often been asserted that the historical sense is entirely lacking in the Indians. In India too there has been historical writing and in any case we find in India numerous accurately dated inscriptions which could hardly be the case if the Indians have had no sense of history at all". He acknowledged that historical writing did exist in ancient India while simultaneously recognising that it took forms different from European models. His emphasis on the numerous accurately dated inscriptions found throughout India provided concrete evidence that ancient Indians possessed sophisticated chronological awareness, directly contradicting claims about their alleged temporal confusion.

The criticism that ancient Indians mixed fact and fiction in their historical narratives ignores the reality that all historical writing involves interpretive elements. Modern historians recognise that ancient Indian texts like Bana's



Harshacharita represent legitimate historical biography, while Puranic genealogies provide authentic records of dynastic succession that have been corroborated by archaeological and epigraphic evidence.

### **Cultural specificity of historical consciousness**

Rather than lacking historical sense, ancient India possessed a culturally specific approach to understanding and recording the past. The Itihasa-Purana tradition emphasised moral and philosophical dimensions of historical experience, focusing on dharma (righteousness), the consequences of actions, and the cyclical nature of prosperity and decline. This approach integrated historical events into broader cosmological and ethical frameworks, creating narratives that served both historical and moral purposes.

The Indian concept of time was more complex than Western scholars initially recognised, incorporating both linear progression in human affairs and cyclical patterns in cosmic processes. This temporal understanding allowed for sophisticated historical analysis while maintaining awareness of recurring patterns in human behaviour and social development.

The tradition of professional storytellers (pauranika, suta, and magadha) ensured that historical knowledge reached all social levels, including women and lower castes who were excluded from Vedic education. This democratic approach to historical transmission contrasts favorably with the elite-focused historiography of many other ancient civilisations.

### **Contemporary reassessment**

As already discussed, the colonial allegation that ancient Indians lacked historical sense has been thoroughly discredited by modern scholarship. Archaeological discoveries, epigraphic evidence, and careful analysis of Indian texts reveal sophisticated historical consciousness expressed through culturally appropriate forms. The Itihasa-Purana tradition represents a legitimate and valuable approach to understanding the past that deserves recognition alongside other world historiographical traditions.

This reassessment has important implications for understanding both ancient Indian civilisation and the nature of historical consciousness itself. It demonstrates that historical awareness can take multiple forms, all equally valid when evaluated within their proper cultural contexts. The colonial critique reflected not Indian deficiencies but Western cultural imperialism that dismissed alternative approaches to understanding and recording the past.

The works of Mill, Hegel, and Macaulay must be understood as products of their time and ideological context - serving to justify colonial domination rather than providing an objective analysis of Indian historical traditions. Modern appreciation of ancient Indian historiography reveals a civilisation that was deeply conscious of its historical development, maintained sophisticated systems for recording and transmitting historical knowledge, and produced historical works that continue to provide valuable insights into India's cultural and political evolution. The alleged "lack of historical sense" was thus a colonial myth that served ideological rather than scholarly purposes.

### **The nature of ancient Indian historical traditions**

Contrary to colonial assertions, ancient India possessed sophisticated and multifaceted historical traditions that

differed from Western models but were no less valid or comprehensive. These traditions encompassed diverse methodologies for preserving, transmitting, and interpreting the past, creating a rich tapestry of historical consciousness that served multiple social, cultural, and political functions.

#### **The Tradition of Itihasa-Purana**

The Itihasa-Purana tradition represents the cornerstone of ancient Indian historiography, encompassing both the great epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) and the vast corpus of Puranic literature. This tradition demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of time, causation, and historical development that integrates factual accounts with moral and philosophical frameworks. The term "Itihasa" literally means "thus it was," emphasising the belief in the events having actually happened, while "Purana" signifies ancient or old, referring to narratives that preserve collective memory across generations.

The Itihasa-Purana tradition operated on three fundamental levels that distinguished it from other historical approaches. First, it incorporated myth as a vehicle for understanding cosmic and universal truths that transcended individual events. Second, it maintained detailed genealogies (vamsanucharita) that provided structural frameworks for understanding dynastic succession and social continuity. Third, it preserved historical narratives that recorded actual events while embedding them within broader cultural and moral contexts.

The structure of the Puranas was specifically designed to provide an integrated worldview of past and present. The historical epicentre of the Itihasa tradition was the "Vansanucharita" or dynastic lists. The Bhavishya was the first Purana to give comprehensive accounts of dynasties of the Kali age, and the Matsya, Vayu, and Brahmanda Puranas derived their chronological frameworks from it. These dynastic lists possessed considerable accountability in historical terms, providing detailed genealogical records that have been corroborated by archaeological and epigraphic evidence.

### **Genealogical traditions and the vamsa system**

The Vamsa system represented one of ancient India's most sophisticated approaches to historical documentation. The word vamsa derives from bamboo or sugar cane reed, symbolising how one distinct segment follows the previous, grows, ends, and becomes the basis for another. This metaphor captured the essential Indian understanding of historical continuity through generational succession. It could focus on various subjects, dynasties, families, individual saints, lines of teachers within particular traditions, or places of pilgrimage. This flexibility allowed the system to preserve diverse types of historical knowledge while maintaining chronological accuracy. The Buddhavamsa, Dipavamsa, and Mahavamsa in Buddhist literature exemplify how this system was adapted across different religious traditions.

In Hinduism, Vamsa signified not merely genealogy but reflected the continuity of gods, sages, and educators across ages. It illustrated metaphorical links between dynasties and knowledge transmission, demonstrating that ancient Indians understood history as both linear progression and cyclical renewal. The tradition maintained detailed records of teacher-student lineages (guru-parampara) that ensured the preservation and transmission of knowledge across generations.

The great epics contained genealogies of both the Lunar line (Chandravamsha) in the Mahabharata and the Solar line (Suryavamsha) in the Ramayana. These genealogies, while not necessarily literally accurate in every detail, reflected systematic attempts to capture historical relationships and provide frameworks for understanding political and social development. The epics also preserved genealogies of sages (Bhrigu), demonstrating that the tradition encompassed both secular and sacred historical consciousness.

### **Professional historiographers: Sutas and magadhas**

Ancient India maintained a sophisticated system of professional storytellers and chroniclers who specialised in preserving and transmitting historical knowledge. The Sutas and Magadhas were descendants of priestly families from the Vedic period who dedicated their lives to memorising chronicles, dynastic histories, and epic tales. Sutas performed dual functions as charioteers and storytellers. According to the Manu Smriti, Sutas were children of Kshatriya fathers and Brahmin mothers, giving them unique social positions that allowed them access to both warrior and priestly traditions. Their two main occupations as per the Mahabharata were storytelling and chariot-driving, positioning them as both participants in and chroniclers of historical events. The most famous Suta was Romaharshana, who received the entire corpus of Puranic literature directly from Vyasa. His name means "one who causes hair to stand on end," indicating his exceptional ability to captivate audiences with dramatic storytelling. Romaharshana's son Ugrasrava Sauti became the narrator of several major Puranas, ensuring the continuation of this professional tradition.

The Magadhas represented another class of professional bards and chroniclers whose primary responsibility was memorising and reciting chronicles, dynastic histories, epic tales, and genealogies. They travelled throughout the subcontinent, visiting courts, universities, and public gatherings to share historical knowledge with diverse audiences. This system ensured that historical consciousness reached all social levels, including women and lower castes who were excluded from formal Vedic education.

### **Historical biography: Bana's revolutionary contribution**

Banabhatta's Harshacharita (c. 640 CE) represents a revolutionary development in ancient Indian historiography, being recognised as the first historical biography in Sanskrit literature. As court poet (Asthana Kavi) to Emperor Harsha, Bana created a work that combined sophisticated literary artistry with genuine historical documentation. Bana's methodological approach demonstrated remarkable historical consciousness. He provided detailed autobiographical information in the early chapters, describing his ancestry, education, and the circumstances that brought him to Harsha's court. His vivid descriptions of rural India's natural environment, the extraordinary industry of the Indian people, and the social conditions of seventh-century India provide invaluable historical documentation.

The Harshacharita reveals Bana's understanding of historical causation and political analysis. While his favourable treatment of Harsha reflects his patronage relationship, the work demonstrates systematic attention to chronology, political relationships, and social conditions. Bana's detailed observations and keen eye for significant detail established

new standards for biographical writing that influenced subsequent Indian historical literature.

Bana's second major work, the prose romance Kadambari, while fictional, demonstrates the sophisticated narrative techniques that ancient Indian writers brought to historical composition. His mastery of the ornate kavya style, involving extremely lengthy constructions and elaborate descriptions, created literary works of great vitality and observational depth.

### **Buddhist and Jain historiographical contributions**

Buddhist and Jain traditions significantly enriched ancient Indian historiography through their emphasis on systematic record-keeping and biographical literature. The Buddhavamsa chronicled the lineage of 24 Buddhas preceding Siddhartha, while the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa provided detailed chronicles of Sri Lankan history from the Buddha's time through the early medieval period. These traditions demonstrated particular sophistication in maintaining chronological accuracy and cross-referencing multiple sources. The Mahavamsa, likely based on the earlier Dipavamsa, exemplifies how Buddhist historical writing combined religious purposes with genuine historical documentation. While some details may be legendary, these works preserve valuable information about political developments, cultural practices, and social conditions across centuries.

Jain literature similarly maintained detailed biographical accounts of Tirthankaras and significant religious figures. The tradition of charita literature in Jainism paralleled the Puranic biographical tradition while maintaining distinct methodological approaches focused on spiritual development and moral exemplarity.

### **Archaeological and epigraphic validation**

Modern archaeological and epigraphic research has consistently validated the historical reliability of ancient Indian literary traditions. Thousands of dated inscriptions across India demonstrate clear chronological consciousness, contradicting colonial assertions about Indian temporal awareness. These inscriptions frequently corroborate genealogical information preserved in Puranic literature, indicating the accuracy of oral transmission systems.

Archaeological excavations at sites mentioned in epic literature have revealed material evidence supporting literary accounts. While not every detail can be verified, the correlation between textual descriptions and archaeological findings demonstrates that ancient Indian literature preserved genuine historical memories alongside mythological elements.

The discovery of coins, sculptures, and architectural remains has provided independent confirmation of dynastic successions and political developments recorded in Puranic genealogies. This archaeological validation demonstrates that ancient Indian historical traditions were based on factual knowledge rather than pure invention, as colonial scholars suggested.

### **Cultural specificity and alternative historiography**

Rather than lacking historical consciousness, ancient India developed culturally specific approaches to understanding and recording the past that emphasised different values from Western historiography. The Indian concept of time incorporated both linear progression in human affairs and

cyclical patterns in cosmic processes, allowing for sophisticated historical analysis while maintaining awareness of recurring patterns in human behaviour.

The Itihasa-Purana tradition emphasised moral and philosophical dimensions of historical experience, focusing on dharma (righteousness), the consequences of actions, and the cyclical nature of prosperity and decline. This approach integrated historical events into broader cosmological and ethical frameworks, creating narratives that served multiple functions: preserving factual information, transmitting cultural values, and providing moral guidance for contemporary audiences. This multifunctional approach to historical writing reflected Indian understanding that history serves not merely as a factual record but as a cultural resource for understanding human nature, social dynamics, and ethical principles. The tradition's emphasis on moral consequences and cyclical patterns provided frameworks for analyzing contemporary events and making decisions about future actions.

The democratic nature of Indian historical transmission, achieved through professional storytellers who reached all social levels, contrasts favorably with the elite-focused historiography of many other ancient civilisations. This inclusive approach ensured that historical consciousness permeated Indian society rather than remaining confined to educated elites, creating a shared cultural memory that strengthened social cohesion across diverse communities.

Through these varied but interconnected traditions, ancient India maintained a sophisticated historical consciousness that preserved factual information, transmitted cultural values, and provided frameworks for understanding temporal development. The alleged "lack of historical sense" was thus a colonial misrepresentation that failed to recognise the validity and sophistication of alternative approaches to historiographical practice.

### **Reconsidering the "lack of historical sense"**

The colonial allegation that ancient Indians lacked historical consciousness has been systematically challenged by multiple generations of Indian historians who have demonstrated the sophistication and validity of indigenous historiographical traditions. This scholarly response represents a fundamental shift from accepting colonial assessments to developing nuanced understandings of how different cultures construct and preserve historical knowledge.

### **Romila Thapar's revolutionary framework**

Romila Thapar emerged as the most influential voice in redefining ancient Indian historiography through her distinction between "embedded" and "externalised" historical consciousness. Her seminal work *Historical Traditions in Early India* (1961) fundamentally challenged colonial assumptions by demonstrating that historical consciousness in ancient India took culturally specific forms that differed from but were no less sophisticated than Western models. She argued that modern notions of history have been governed by definitions that emerged from the Enlightenment, with emphasis on sequential narrative, chronology, and focus on political authority. In India, these Western standards were overlaid by colonial views on representing the past, creating a framework that inevitably found Indian traditions deficient. However, she demonstrated that assessing ancient Indian narratives

requires judging them by accepted historical methods while recognising their cultural specificity rather than imposing foreign criteria.

Her analysis revealed that historical consciousness in early India was often "embedded" within texts serving ritual, moral, or cosmological functions, such as Vedic hymns and epic narratives. By the 4th-6th centuries CE, this embedded awareness was "externalised" into discrete historical traditions, most notably the Itihasa-Purana corpus, which provided dynastic lists, genealogies, and chronologies alongside religious content. This evolutionary understanding showed that Indian historical writing developed sophisticated methodologies appropriate to its cultural context.

Thapar's work emphasised that the concern should not be whether historical writing was absent in early India, but rather understanding "the nature and assumptions of its historical traditions". Her approach sought to identify historical concerns of ancient societies rather than claiming historicity for every recorded event, recognising that examining how the past is perceived, recorded, and used provides crucial insights into early Indian society.

### **D.D. Kosambi's methodological revolution**

Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi revolutionised Indian historiography by applying Marxist analytical methods while rejecting mechanical interpretations of historical materialism. His groundbreaking work, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956) <sup>[8]</sup>, established new methodological standards that influenced generations of subsequent historians. He declared the "The light-hearted sneer 'India has had some episodes, but no history' is used to justify lack of study, grasp, intelligence on the part of foreign writers about India's past". He argued that it was precisely the episodes, lists of dynasties and kings, tales of war and battle that were missing from Indian records, requiring historians to "reconstruct a history without episodes, which means that it cannot be the same type of history as in the European tradition". His methodological approach emphasised understanding history through socio-economic formations rather than chronological narration of episodes or the feats of great men. Kosambi took the social group as the framework within which individuals act and react, not the individual as an autonomous unit separate from society, as the starting point for analysing historical processes. He explained historical development in terms of material conditions, writing: "Individual molecules of water may move in any direction, with almost any speed, but the river as a whole shows directed motion in spite of eddies. So also for the aggregates of living matter".

Kosambi's work demonstrated that Indian society had its history and stages of development, making social change the basis for periodizing Indian history. He argued that the basic mechanism of exploitation in India was caste rather than slavery or serfdom, representing a historically specific form of bondage that characterised India's "Asiatic mode" of production. His concept of "feudalism from above" and "feudalism from below" described processes of political formation unique to Indian conditions.

### **R.S. Sharma's social and economic analysis**

Ram Sharan Sharma advanced the Marxist historiographical tradition initiated by Kosambi while developing his own analytical frameworks for understanding ancient and

medieval India. His major works, *Sudras in Ancient India* (1958) and *Indian Feudalism* (1965), provided detailed examinations of social structures and economic systems that contradicted colonial stereotypes about Indian society being static and unchanging. His approach to Indian feudalism differed from Kosambi's formulations while building upon his foundational insights. He studied feudalism as evolving through different stages of ancient Indian development, treating it essentially as a system of production for use marked by the decline of towns and trade. His research collected extensive data suggesting constraints on peasant movement that made peasants akin to semi-serfs, while also identifying peasant uprisings such as the Kaivartas in Bengal.

Through works like *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (1985), Sharma demonstrated an exceptional ability to approach varied sources, literary texts, epigraphy, inscriptions, coins, and archaeological remains with sophisticated analytical methods. His materialistic approach convincingly demonstrated the absence of classical slavery in ancient India while underlining the dynamic character of Indian society, demolishing colonial myths about its alleged static and vegetative nature.

However, Sharma's work also generated controversy, particularly his interpretations of ancient Indian dietary practices and religious developments. Critics argued that some of his conclusions, such as claims about beef consumption in ancient India, reflected ideological rather than scholarly motivations. Despite such debates, his contributions to understanding the socioeconomic dynamics of ancient India remain foundational to modern Indian historiography.

#### **K.M. Shrimali's synthetic approach**

Krishna Mohan Shrimali represents the continuation of rigorous historical scholarship that combines multiple methodological approaches while maintaining focus on ancient Indian social and cultural development. His works, including *History of Pancala* and studies of agrarian structures, demonstrate sophisticated use of epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological evidence to reconstruct historical processes. His approach emphasises regional specificities while maintaining a macro-level understanding of historical developments. His work on the Vakataka inscriptions and agrarian structures in Central India exemplifies how modern Indian historians use diverse source materials to construct comprehensive pictures of ancient social and economic systems.

#### **Ashis Nandy's critical traditionalism**

Ashis Nandy, while primarily a political psychologist and social theorist rather than a historian, provided crucial critiques of colonial historiography and Western academic frameworks that influenced historical understanding. His concept of "critical traditionalism" offered alternative approaches to understanding Indian civilisation that challenged both colonial denigration and uncritical modernisation. He argued that colonial criticism of indigenous historiography formed part of a broader "civilizational arrogance" that dismissed alternative approaches to knowledge and understanding. His work emphasised the need for pluralistic approaches to historiographical forms that respect cultural specificity rather than judging by foreign standards. He critiqued the

assumption that India's problem was the lack of "Enlightenment" thinking, arguing instead for recognition of indigenous intellectual traditions.

His analysis of colonialism's psychological impact demonstrated how colonial education and administrative systems created alienation from indigenous knowledge traditions, including historical consciousness. Nandy's work revealed how the colonial critique of Indian "ahistoricity" served ideological functions in justifying imperial domination while undermining indigenous confidence in their own intellectual heritage.

#### **Collective impact and contemporary significance**

The contributions of these Indian historians collectively established several crucial points that fundamentally challenge colonial assessments of Indian historical consciousness. First, they demonstrated that historical awareness can take multiple forms, all equally valid when evaluated within proper cultural contexts. The supposed absence of historical sense in ancient India resulted from applying inappropriate Western standards to Indian materials rather than recognising indigenous methodological sophistication.

Second, these scholars showed that ancient Indian historical traditions the *Itihasa-Purana* corpus, genealogical records, court biographies, and regional chronicles represented legitimate and sophisticated approaches to understanding and recording the past. These traditions served multiple functions, preserving factual information, transmitting cultural values, providing frameworks for political legitimisation, and offering moral guidance for contemporary audiences.

Third, their work revealed that the colonial narrative of Indian "ahistoricity" was itself a historical construction serving particular ideological purposes. Colonial historians needed to portray Indian civilisation as deficient in historical consciousness to justify imperial intervention as historically necessary, presenting British rule as bringing historical awareness to a civilisation that supposedly lacked it.

The modern Indian historiographical tradition established by these scholars continues to influence contemporary research through its emphasis on rigorous source criticism, attention to socioeconomic dynamics, recognition of cultural specificity, and commitment to understanding historical processes through indigenous perspectives. Their collective work demonstrates that reclaiming historical consciousness requires not only challenging colonial stereotypes but also developing methodological frameworks appropriate to specific cultural contexts while maintaining universal standards of scholarly rigour.

This historiographical revolution has important implications beyond academic circles, contributing to broader processes of decolonisation and cultural recovery that continue to shape contemporary Indian intellectual life. The recognition that ancient India possessed sophisticated historical traditions worthy of serious scholarly attention represents a fundamental shift in understanding that validates indigenous approaches to knowledge while contributing to global historiographical diversity.

#### **Conclusion**

The reassessment of ancient Indian historiography has fundamental implications for understanding the relationship



between historical consciousness and cultural identity. The recognition that ancient Indian civilisation possessed sophisticated historical awareness challenges colonial narratives that portrayed non-Western societies as ahistorical and therefore legitimately subject to Western domination. This recognition contributes to cultural recovery processes that enable postcolonial societies to engage with modernity on their own terms rather than as passive recipients of Western civilisation. It also reveals that the alleged "lack of historical sense" in ancient India was itself a historical construction serving particular ideological purposes rather than representing objective scholarly analysis. This recognition has important implications for understanding how historical narratives function in processes of cultural domination and resistance, providing insights relevant to contemporary struggles over cultural identity and historical memory globally. The transformation in understanding ancient Indian historiography thus represents not merely academic correction but a fundamental shift in recognising the validity and sophistication of non-Western approaches to historical knowledge. This recognition contributes to a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of human civilisation that respects cultural diversity while maintaining universal standards of scholarly inquiry.

## References

1. Berkemer G. Banausia and endo-history: European concepts of Indian historical consciousness. Internet Publ Ser South Asian Hist. 2007;7.
2. Bhasam AL. The wonder that was India. London: Sidgwick & Jackson; 1954.
3. Hegel GWF. Lectures on the philosophy of history. Sibree J, translator. New York: Colonial Press; 1900.
4. Hegel GWF. The philosophy of history. Sibree J, translator. Kitchener: Batoche Books; 2001.
5. Hegel GWF. The philosophy of history. Sibree J, translator. New York: Colonial Press; 1899.
6. Kalhaṇa. Kings of Kāśmīr (Rājatarāṅgiṇī of Kalhaṇa). Stein A, translator. Vol. 1. Lahore: Government Press; 1900.
7. Kosambi DD. Science, society & peace. Bombay: Popular Prakashan; 1974.
8. Kosambi DD. An introduction to the study of Indian history. Pune: Popular Book Depot; 1956.
9. Macaulay TB. Minute on English education, 2 Feb. 1835. In: Sharp H, editor. Selections from educational records, Part I, 1781–1839. Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing; 1920. p. 107-17.
10. Macaulay TB. Minute on Indian education, 2 Feb. 1835. In: Selections from educational records, Part I, 1781–1839. Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing; c1919, p. 107-117.
11. Manu. The laws of Manu. Muller M, editor. Buhler G, translator. Vol. 25. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1886. (Sacred Books of the East).
12. Mill J. The history of British India. Vol. 1. London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy; 1817.
13. Monier-Williams M. A Sanskrit-English dictionary. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1899.
14. Monier-Williams M. A Sanskrit-English dictionary. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1899.
15. Nandy A. Science, authoritarianism and culture. In: Nandy A. Traditions, tyranny and utopias: Essays in the politics of awareness. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 1987.
16. Pargiter FE. Ancient Indian historical tradition. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1922.
17. Shreedharan E. A textbook of historiography. Delhi: Orient Longman; 2004.
18. Singh GP. Evolution of Indian historical tradition. Delhi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan; 2004.
19. Thapar R. Ancient Indian social history: Some interpretations. New Delhi: Orient Longman; 1978.
20. Thapar R. Past and prejudice. New Delhi: National Book Trust; 1975.
21. Thapar R. The past before us: Historical traditions of early North India. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 2013.
22. Thapar R. Time as a metaphor of history. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2002.
23. Winternitz M. A history of Indian literature. Ketkar S, translator. Vol. 1. Calcutta: University of Calcutta; 1927.