

Source and tools of historical reconstruction: literary sources - I



Subject: History

Unit: Reconstructing Ancient Indian History

**Lesson: Source and Tools of Historical Reconstruction:
Literary Sources - I**

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1.3.1.1: Sources and tools of historical reconstruction: literary sources - I

Special features of early Indian literary sources

There are many sources for reconstructing ancient Indian history. These are usually studied under two main heads: archaeological and literary sources. The latter in the Indian context includes not only written texts but literature that for most of its formative phase was not written down but transmitted orally, through memorization, from generation to generation. Such texts were compiled and put down in writing much after they were composed - sometimes centuries after. This creates a problem regarding the use of these sources for history writing, since it is not clear which period - that of composition or of compilation - they refer to.

Another peculiarity of works of early Indian literature is that they are rarely a single text; they occur mostly as a corpus of several books or volumes which were not composed together but at different points of time, again spread over centuries or even a thousand years. This is called **internal stratification**: the multiple layers of time represented in a single body of literature. Often even within a volume, different chapters may belong to different time periods. Parts that get added on to the original story/narration over time are called later interpolations. These make dating the text, and the historian's task of sifting through what the text contains, a complex affair.

Historians have to also be conscious of numerous biases or positional perspectives in early Indian literature. For example, almost all these texts were composed by men, not women. This has resulted in women being virtually invisible in the narrations or being portrayed in negative ways. However, such representations cannot be taken literally; while they reflect the subordination of women, known as patriarchy, it does not mean women were actually only passive victims. Scholars have shown how it is possible to read between the lines and uncover a more complex social reality where women played active roles and resisted control.

Similarly, most early Indian texts were composed by members of the educated upper classes and upper castes. As such they tend to carry a by and large elite perspective and often one that looks down upon lower social groups. It should be remembered, however, that sometimes texts that recommend the social exclusion of low castes and outcastes are **prescriptive** rather than descriptive texts. This means they have to be understood as *recommendations* that put forward an elite worldview/ideology but do not necessarily portray social *reality* in its complexity or totality.

This is another feature of early Indian literature: much of it is didactic, which means it is intended to provide moral instruction. A large part of it is also mythological: divine or supernatural characters or themes figure prominently or divine authority is invoked to explain phenomena. The close mixing of supernatural with earthly elements in the telling of tales makes traditional Indian literature seemingly unfit for historical purposes. In

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fact, however, myths have recently been seen as a device for narrating stories in a symbolic, rather than literal or direct, way.

The above discussion is a general one about literary sources. The truth is that there is great variety in this field and these observations may apply more to some and less to other types of texts. The point to remember is that early Indian literature is a highly complex source of history that calls for sophisticated, rather than simplistic, strategies of interpretation, which are sensitive to the special ways in which different texts may represent history. Approached in this way, this literature is a storehouse of knowledge that has the potential to yield a great deal that is of interest and relevance to scholars of history.

There can be different ways of classifying early Indian literature, like sacred and secular, indigenous and foreign accounts, or distinguishing among languages of composition like Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil, or genres like *agama* (scripture), *itihasa* (history), *shastra* (technical treatise) and *kavya* (creative literature). Below we sample some texts, broadly following the chronological order in which they are believed to have been composed. It is not a comprehensive sampling by any means. It includes only some major types of texts that have been important in the reconstruction of aspects of early India.

The Vedas

The earliest known literature from the Indian subcontinent is in Sanskrit, one of the oldest known languages in the world and part of the linguistic group called Indo-European to which also belong French, German, Latin, Persian and several others. This earliest literature is oral and is called the Vedas, from the root *vid* (literally, 'to know'), and Veda means 'knowledge'. The Vedas are traditionally regarded as *shruti*, i.e., 'heard' or revealed texts, words said to be uttered by the god Brahma in the ears of the first man. This is essentially a reference to the great antiquity of these texts and to the sanctity associated with them. They are oral literature par excellence.

There are four Vedas, *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*, which have come down to us in various branches or recensions known as *shakhas*. The *Atharva* is believed to be less orthodox than the others, since it deals with themes like evil influences, diseases, omens, amulets and magical spells, among other things. Each Veda has four parts: Samhita (collection of verses/hymns or *suktas*), Brahmana (collection of *mantras* or ritual formulae), Aranyaka ('forest books' containing philosophical speculations) and Upanishad (the *vedanta* or end part of the Vedas that contains mystical discussions on the nature of the soul and of creation, etc.). Chronologically, this whole body of texts can be divided into early and later parts. Early Vedic literature includes just Books II to VII of the *Rig Veda Samhita*, believed to be composed between 1500 and 1000 BCE. Later Vedic literature includes Books I, VIII, IX and X of the *Rig Veda Samhita*, all the other parts of the *Rig Veda*, and the other three Vedas. They were composed between

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1000 and 500 BCE. Please note that these dates are tentative and only one set of dates out of several others that different scholars have suggested, some of which would make the Vedas as old as 4000 or 3000 BCE! The most recent dating of the *Rig Veda* on linguistic grounds is by Michael Witzel, putting it at 1900 BCE.

The Vedas as a whole are collections of hymns on themes ranging from prayers for more children and cattle, to speculation over the origins of the universe (known as cosmogony), and deliverance from disease and evil forces. The beginnings of musical notation (*Sama Veda*) and medicine (*Atharva Veda*), not to mention philosophy, astronomy and mathematics, can be traced to the Vedas that are traditionally believed to be the fount of all knowledge. Historians have extracted information for social and economic history from incidental references in these texts, such as the transition from a pastoral, pre-class-and-caste society in the *Rig Veda* to agriculture, class, caste and political territories in the later Vedas. This is detailed in unit 2.5.1.

Value addition: voices from the past

The *Hiranyagarbha Sukta*

Here is an extract from *Rig Veda* X.121 (*Hiranyagarbha Sukta*) and X.129. Note the deeply curious imagination that does not accept God as the ultimate creating principle but seeks some principle of creation that created the gods themselves.

'A golden embryo (*hiranya garbha*) evolved in the beginning. Born the lord of what has come to be, it alone existed. It established the earth and heaven here. To what deity should we do homage with oblations? Who is the life-giver, the strength-giver, whose decree all, [even] the gods honour...? To what deity should we do homage with oblations? ... When the deep waters came, carrying everything as an embryo and giving birth to the fire, then the life of the gods, the sole [existent] evolved - to what deity should we do homage with oblations? ...' (*Rig Veda* X. 121)

'There was no non-existent and no existent at that time. There was neither the mid-space nor the heaven beyond. What stirred? And under whose control? ... Darkness was there, hidden by darkness, in the beginning. A signless ocean was everything here ... Who really knows? Who shall here proclaim it -- how things came to be, how this creation? The gods are on this side, along with the creation [of this world]. So then who does know how it came to be? He who is its overseer in the highest heaven, he surely knows. Or if he too does not know ...?' (*Rig Veda* X. 129)

And now sample a verse from the *Atharva Veda*. It is a spell or *mantra* to drive away fever, which seems to resemble the flu.

'May Agni drive the fever away from here....So cold, then burning, you make us shake with coughing, terrible are your characteristics, O fever; spare us from them! O fever, with your brother the lingering sickness, with your sister the fit of coughing, with your cousin the itch, go away and stay with other people! ... To the people of Gandhara and of Mujavant, to those of Anga and of Magadha, we send the fever...!' (*Atharva Veda* V.22)

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Source: Embree, Ainslie (ed.). 1988. *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. I, 2nd edn. New York, 19-21; Renou, Louis. 1971. *Vedic India, Classical India*. Vol. 3. Delhi: Varanasi: Indological Book House, 23-24.

The Dharmashastras

Post-Vedic Sanskrit literature is also known as *smṛiti* or 'memorized', rather than 'heard' (*śruti*), texts. The suggested meaning is that these were composed by humans -- great sages -- and not revealed by God. So they do not enjoy the sanctity reserved for the Vedas but are authoritative in their own right. **An important group of post-Vedic texts is the Dharmashastras. *Dharma*, from the root *dhri* meaning 'to maintain or support', has multiple meanings: broadly it refers to natural and moral laws governing the universe and the lives of people. The Dharmashastras are socio-legal texts from early India composed in two broad phases. The early Dharmasutras were composed between 500 and 200 BCE; they include the *Baudhayana Dharmasutra*, the *Gotama Dharmasutra* and the *Apastamba Dharmasutra*. The later phase saw the composition, between 200 BCE and 900 CE, of the Dharmasmritis, like *Manu Smṛiti*, *Narada Smṛiti* and *Yajñavalkya Smṛiti*.**

These texts, together with the numerous commentaries (*tika*) written on them, lay down the founding principles of Brahmanical social and moral order. The most important is the *varnashramadharma*, that provides for the division of society into four broad *varnas*, brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra, that are placed in descending order of status and privileges. The texts prescribe the duties of each. These texts also tell us about *jatis*, or smaller groups the numbers of which ran into hundreds and thousands over the centuries. The main features of the *varna-jati* system according to these texts were endogamy (marriage within one's social group) and hereditary occupation. We do however hear of *varnasamkara* or mixing of the *varnas*, suggesting that cross-*varna* marital unions, some acceptable (*anuloma*) and some unacceptable (*pratiloma*), did happen (although *varnasamkara* was probably a legal fiction to accommodate different *jatis* as high or low into the *varna* scheme). Similarly, these texts allow for exceptions to the rule on occupations during a crisis, which is called *apad-dharma* or duty in distress. The very mention of *varnasamkara* and *apad-dharma* that run opposite to the two main rules of caste shows that social reality could be very different from theory or what was prescribed. So it is necessary for historians to read between the lines when using the Dharmashastra for reconstructing early Indian social history. Other topics a Dharmashastra typically covers are: rites and sacraments and *yajnas*, the vow of studenthood (*brahmacharya*), the taking of a bride (*grihastha*), various kinds of

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marriages, rules for what may be eaten and what may not, the purification of men and of objects, women, the rules of a hermit's life (*vanaprastha*), renunciation of worldly life (*sanyasa*), duties of a king, laws of inheritance of property, laws concerning gambling, laws of different regions and peoples, the eternal law (*sanatana dharma*) of individual families (*Manu Smriti* I.111-18).

Value addition: voices from the past

The *Manu Smriti* and women

In this extract from the *Manu Smriti* (III.55-7; IX.3-7,11,26), it becomes clear how important women are in Manu's scheme of things.

'Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law who desire great good fortune. Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice; where they are not honoured, there all sacred rites prove fruitless. Where the female relations live in grief, that family soon perishes; where they do not suffer from any grievance, that family always prospers....Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, her sons protect her in old age - a woman does not deserve independence. A husband protects his own offspring, character, family, self and *dharma* when he protects his wife scrupulously...The husband should engage his wife in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in cleanliness, in *dharma*, in cooking for the family, and in looking after the necessities of the household...Women destined to bear children, enjoying great good fortune, deserving of worship, [are like] the resplendent lights of homes....'

Source: Embree, Ainslie (ed.). 1988. *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol. I*, 2nd edn. New York, 228-29.

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The Mahabharata and the Ramayana

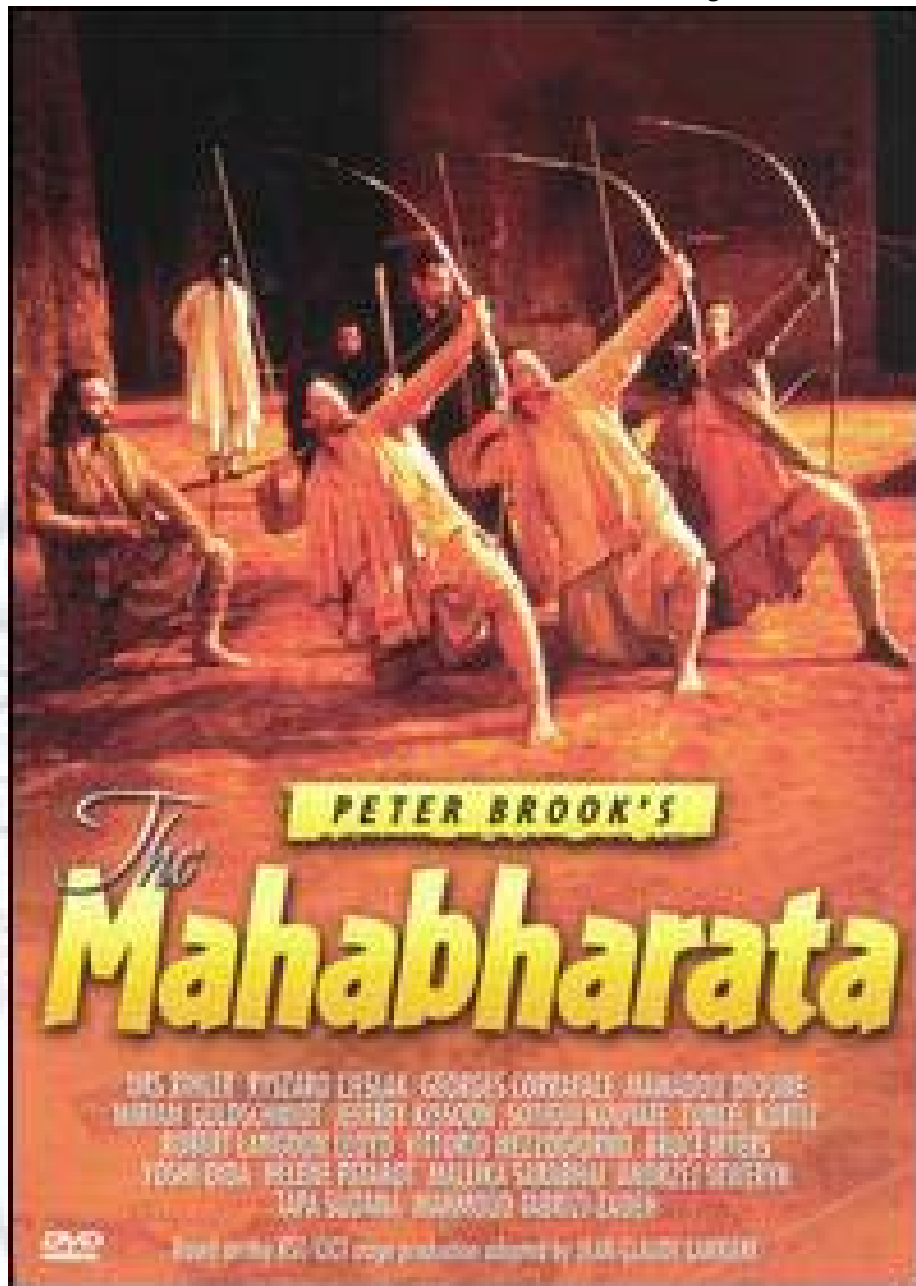


Figure 1.3.1.1.1: A scene from Peter Brook's dramatization of the Indian epic

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mahabharata_\(1989_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mahabharata_(1989_film))

The period between 500 BCE and 500 CE saw the composition of the two famous epics, Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Valmiki's *Ramayana*. These are known as *itihasa* ('thus it was') or narratives on the past. Their magnificent and powerful stories are very well known in the Indian subcontinent and beyond, like in south east Asia where they are performed to this day. The *Mahabharata* is the enormous and complex story of the fight for a kingdom between two sets of royal cousins, the Kurus and the Pandavas of Hastinapur. It seems to have started out as a smaller text, known as *Jaya* (Victory), which expanded by the

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incorporation of thousands of myths and secondary stories over time to its full size of a 1,00,000 verses. The *Ramayana* is the smaller (24,000 verses) and more compact tale of Rama's exile from the kingdom and his triumphant crusade against the demon king Ravana of Lanka. The original story of Rama, the Ayodhyan prince, also grew over time and Rama emerges as the incarnation of god Vishnu in this text. Thus the *Ramayana*, as also the *Mahabharata* because of the role of Krishna and his *Bhagavad Gita* (Divine Song) in it, are regarded as not only the mother of all tales but also sacred scriptures.



Figure 1.3.1.1.2: A scene from the Ramayana being enacted in Indonesia where it is very popular

Source: [flickr.com/photos/portfolio/542883379/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/portfolio/542883379/)

Their importance for religious history apart, we can see the epics as simply fiction and mythology or we can search for a kernel of historical truth in them (some scholars have tried to do this literally by excavating sites mentioned in the epics). We can interpret them as recording the establishment in history of significant political practices. For example, primogeniture, or the passing of the throne to the eldest son, is seen first challenged and then re-established in both texts. The epics are also perfect examples of didactic texts: they enshrine significant social and cultural values, like devotion to one's parents and elder brothers, and loyalty to one's husband. The *Ramayana* lays down models of ideal behaviour for men and women in various roles, like *maryadapurushottama* Rama and the chaste Sita, which have had a powerful influence on shaping Indian social thought and practice. (Note that various versions of the *Ramayana* were composed after Valmiki's text in other languages like Prakrit and Tamil and these often question the values prescribed

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in the original.) The *Mahabharata* examines closely the question of *dharma* or what is righteous behavior and what is not. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which is a part of the *Mahabharata*, is not only a Vaishnava scripture but a profound philosophical document that seeks to guide individual action in the time of crisis and self doubt.

Value addition: voices from the past

Remain the same in pleasure and pain ...

Influenced considerably by the Upanishads, this extract from the *Bhagavad Gita* explains the indestructible nature of the soul which does not die when the body dies. So the wise do not allow various states the impermanent body goes through - like pleasure and pain, joy and despair, victory and defeat - to overwhelm them, but remain the same, calm and hard working people in all conditions.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWKyUmRhjG4>

Exercises

Essay questions

- 1) Discuss the main challenges historians face when using early Indian texts.
- 2) In what ways can the Dharmashastras be drawn on for reconstructing early social history?
- 3) What political and cultural values do you think the Sanskrit epics reflect?

Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	Match the following	1

Question

Match the following:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1) <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> | a) Origins of the universe |
| 2) <i>Itihasa</i> | b) "Knowledge" |
| 3) Veda | c) <i>Varnashramadharma</i> |

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- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| 4) <i>Hiranyagarbha Sukta</i> | d) "Thus it was" |
| 1) | |
| 2) 5) <i>Manu Smriti</i> | e) Vaishnavism |

Correct Answer / Option(s)	1) and e), 2) and d), 3) and b), 4 and a), 5) and c)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

- | |
|---|
| <p>1) The <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> is a scripture devoted to the worship of Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu.</p> <p>2) <i>Itihasa</i> literally means "thus it was"; it is the name of the textual genre to which the <i>Mahabharata</i> and <i>Ramayana</i> belong.</p> <p>3) Veda literally means "knowledge"; it is from the root '<i>vid</i>' which means 'to know.'</p> <p>4) The <i>Hiranyagarbha Sukta</i> is a Vedic hymn that speculates about the origins of the universe from a golden embryo.</p> <p>5) The <i>Manu Smriti</i> is a dharmashastra that deals with the topic of the four <i>varnas</i> and the <i>ashramas</i> and their duties.</p> |
|---|

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Reviewer's Comment:

Summary

- There is a great diversity of texts from early India. They have their own special features which need to be taken into account when using them as historical sources. Chief difficulties relate to chronology and internal stratification.
- There are four Vedas, Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva, and each has four parts, Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanisad. Early Vedic literature is from between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE while Later Vedic literature is from 1000 BCE to 500 BCE. These are only provisional dates.
- The Dharmashastras are socio-legal codes composed between 500-200 BCE and 200BCE-900 CE. They furnish us with the founding principles of the Brahmanical social system like the chatur-varna-ashrama-dharma, the jatis, hierarchy, purity

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and pollution, rites and sacraments to be performed, and laws of inheritance, marriage etc.

- The Mahabharata and Ramayana grew in size over different stages of composition between circa 500 BCE and 500 CE. They are grand narratives that tell tales of
- the royal clans of Hastinapura and Ayodhya respectively. They convey various political, sectarian and cultural beliefs and values of the time that have also played an important role over the ages.

Further readings

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Glossary

Anuloma: hypergamy

Endogamy: marriage within one's social group

Internal Stratification: the presence of many layers of time of composition within a single text

Pratiloma: Hypogamy

Prescriptive: a work that recommends a certain idea or practice as desirable (which therefore may or may not have prevailed outside theory in the real world)

Primogeniture: the rule by which the throne passes from the king to his eldest son