

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

Author(s): Barrie M. Morrison

Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Spring, 1968, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring, 1968), pp. 71-85

Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2754720>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pacific Affairs*

JSTOR

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

A Review Article

A DISCUSSION OF THE sources, methods, and concepts of early Indian history can best begin with a general statement on the broader significance of South Asian history.¹ The initial proposition is that the culture of the inhabitants of South Asia should be the area of central concern for the student investigating the past. It is not the isolated study of geography, of economic technology, or of dynastic history that forms the central subject matter of history but that inter-related and inter-acting whole of human behaviour which we call culture. Secondly, within the totality of this culture it is the selective structuring of perceptions about their physical and human environment by the participants which is the most distinctive part of their culture. Through the symbolizing power of speech and grammatical organization; through the ordering of social interactions; through the treasuring of hard-won information on gathering, planting, and breeding of food sources; through the systematic exploration of the potentials of the human mind and body, Indians have entered into a successful and unique set of relations with their universe. This cultural heritage which has been preserved, elaborated, and transmitted for a hundred or more generations distinguishes them as members of one of the world's great civilizations. A third proposition is that the historian of India must seek to preserve and understand this past achievement. It is the record of such civilizations which constitute the true wonders of the world and, when taken collectively, comprise an unrivalled treasure-house of human information. This store of experience gives modern man a wide-ranging familiarity with the capacities and limitations of his species. It gives him a repertoire of experience upon which he can build with an imagination, humanity, tenacity, and pride equal to that of his forbears. Moreover, the scholar perceiving what is unique and what is common in each civilization should seek to discern, in conjunction with others, the evolutionary history of human society. This is an enterprise which historians will turn to with increasing frequency as they seek to find, through an empirical investigation of the past, some clearer perception of mankind's future course.

What, then, have been some of the recent developments in early Indian

¹ The substance of this paper was presented as a lecture at the University of Michigan in December 1967.

Pacific Affairs

history and how have they advanced our understanding of the past? What are the principal sources and how are they being interpreted? What concepts have been or can be used to define the problems and interpret the data?

Scholars concerned with the study of India have placed varying emphases upon their sources, methods, or concepts. Cultural anthropologists, apparently overwhelmed by the visible complexity and strangeness of Indian life, have devised a series of concepts to order the immense array of data which is so readily available for contemporary India. In contrast, the historians of early India have been, and continue to be, faced with the problem of fragmentary sources of questionable reliability. The concern of the historian has thus been focused upon his source material and the techniques of extracting the optimum amount of reliable information from those sources. They have expended their energies on critical studies of the sources, producing editions of texts and inscriptions, and on auxiliary studies of epigraphy, dating systems, dynastic sequences and like matters. All of the senior historians, such as R. C. Majumdar, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, and D. C. Sircar have made major contributions to the establishment of a corpus of reliable source materials and to the development of aids to assist in the analysis of the sources.² It is thus appropriate to begin this review with a consideration of some of the sources available for the study of early India.

The sources are readily grouped into three categories—material remains (potsherds, bricks, statues, coins, structures, and so forth); written materials (inscriptions, and texts); and observation of contemporary cultural data (including studies of language, social structure, place names, folk tales, and agricultural technology). For purposes of presentation, they are grouped and treated sequentially, but obviously many investigators have exploited sources from each of the three groups in their researches.

The most informative material remains are those recovered in an associational complex such as are found on archaeological sites. Fortunately for the historian, there are many sites which have been reported. These have been brought to light through the efforts of the Archaeological Survey of India, the various state departments of archaeology and, increasingly, university departments of archaeology. The volume of archaeological reporting has reached such an extent that since 1926 the Kern Institute of Leiden has been publishing the *Annual Bibliography of Indian Archaeology* to keep interested persons abreast of new discoveries.³ The quality of the reports of

² See, for example, R. C. Majumdar, "Two Copper-Plates of Sasanka from Midnapore," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. Letters*, XI (1945), 1-9; "Pāla Chronology," *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, XV (1929), 643-50. K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "Cōla Legends, Being A Detailed Notice Of Some Manuscripts," *Journal of Oriental Research*, IV (1930), 318-40; *Studies in Cola History and Administration* (Madras, 1932). D. C. Sircar, "Copper-plate Inscription of King Bhavadeva of Devaparvata," *Journal of the Asiatic Society. Letters*, XVII (1951), 83-94; *Indian Epigraphy* (Delhi, 1965).

³ From my own observations in West Bengal and East Pakistan, from conversations with

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

the excavated or surveyed sites varies widely. There is, for example, the incompetent reporting of a poorly planned and executed excavation at Mohenjo-daro by Sir John Marshall (1931) and some other early excavators, both British and Indian, who destroyed far more than they reported.⁴ There is the more systematic and disciplined work of Sir Mortimer Wheeler with his important excavation at Arikamedu (1946) which established a datum line with the Roman arretine ware for the pottery sequences of South, Central, and parts of North India.⁵ Even in the present day, the bulk of the reports remain narrowly descriptive without adequate ecological information on the site, with little analytical typing of the materials recovered, and without a consideration of the implications of overlapping materials from other sites.⁶

With the utilization of modern techniques of archaeology (such as environmental archaeology or refined systems of typing and reporting on large volumes of surface materials), as well as with the willingness of archaeological investigators to exploit any relevant textual or ethnographic evidence, there are a number of more informative studies. These include the work of H. D. Sankalia and his associates, F. R. Allchin, N. R. Banerjee, Lorenz Leshnik, and this writer's own work. Sankalia, Professor at the Postgraduate and Research Center in Poona, has worked chiefly in prehistoric archaeology of the northern Deccan from which he has adduced evidence of a distinctive culture emerging in the area lying across the historic route between the central plains of northern India and the lower west coast.⁷ He is in the process of relating the cultures traced in the archaeological excavations to information gained from historic place-name studies in an effort to demarcate

persons who are familiar with the lowlands of Orissa and Andhra, as well as from reading the ethnographic literature, I suspect that there are many more archaeological sites as yet unreported. This suspicion arises from an exploration of the Lalmai-Mainamati Hills of East Pakistan in which I surveyed over fifty historic sites, many of which had been previously examined by the Department of Archaeology of Pakistan but none of which had been identified prior to the 1950s. Similarly, in West Bengal, Judy Birmingham of the University of Sydney has identified a number of new sites along the Damodar and Ajay rivers. Further to the south, along the river courses of the Mahanadi, the Vamsadhara, and the Kaveri, I am told by friends in the Archaeological Survey of India that there are a number of Buddhist remains which have never been surveyed. In the hill country of the Chota Nagpur there are a hundred or more iron-age sites which an ethnographer listed forty years ago (S. C. Roy, "Distribution and Nature of Asur Sites in Chota Nagpur," *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, VI (1920), 393-423) and which have not been examined, to the best of my knowledge. If such proportions of reported and unreported sites prevail throughout the rest of India, then we may infer that the concentration of archaeological materials in South Asia must rival those of any other comparable area.

⁴ Sir John H. Marshall (ed.), *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization* (London, 1931).

⁵ Sir R. E. Mortimer Wheeler, "Arikamedu: An Indo-Roman Trading Station," *Ancient India*, II (1946), 117-24.

⁶ See for example the reports of P. C. Das Gupta, *The Excavations at Pandu Rajar Dibhi* (Calcutta, 1964); R. Subrahmanyam, *Salihundam* (Hyderabad, 1964).

⁷ H. D. Sankalia, B. Subbarao and S. B. Deo, *The Excavations at Maheswar and Navdatoli (1952-53)* (Poona, 1958); H. D. Sankalia, S. B. Deo, Z. D. Ansari and S. Ehrhardt, *From History to Pre-History at Nevasa (1954-56)* (Poona, 1960).

Pacific Affairs

the emergence of cultural regions in the area.⁸ F. R. Allchin, University Lecturer in Indian Studies, Cambridge University, has utilized the skills of the zoologist, botanist, and chemist in an attempt to reconstruct the environment and the herding economy of the pastoralists of Southern India.⁹ Like Sankalia, he has drawn upon the place-names in an effort to locate the range of activity of the herders, as well as using ethnographic observations of present day herding practices and the festivals associated with the herding economy to interpret his archaeological data. N. R. Banerjee, Deputy Director-General in the Archaeological Survey of India, has combined information taken from the archaeological reports with material from the ancient texts to present a more comprehensive and important study of the development of iron-using cultures in North India.¹⁰ Younger scholars, such as Lorenz S. Leshnik of Heidelberg University, with his ethnographic work informing his archaeological studies,¹¹ and the present writer, are following these approaches. My own report on the historic sites in the Lalmai-Mainamati hills combines evidence gained from the analysis of surface collections of pottery with information from site surveys of individual monasteries, temples, and palaces, with inscriptional information, and with the utilization of place-name information.¹² From such diverse sources it has been possible to marshal evidence for a major cultural center which provided generous endowments for a particular sect of Buddhists from the sixth to eleventh centuries A.D. The economy of the region, based on wet rice cultivation and utilizing the only silver coinage in circulation in north-eastern India at the time, was rich enough to support a religious and political center which attracted monks from Burma and China and, probably, predatory raids from Burma and South India. The evaluation of the significance of this center for the political and religious history of North-Eastern India has only begun.

Enough has been said to give some indication of the extent and potential value of the archaeological evidences. However, in addition to materials recovered as part of a complex there are many isolated material sources of information, such as coinage and sculpture. The systematic study of the coinage has recently been advanced though the work of D. D. Kosambi in his

⁸ H. D. Sankalia, *Studies in the Historical and Cultural Geography and Ethnography of Gujarat* (Poona, 1949), and *Indian Archaeology Today* (Bombay, 1962).

⁹ F. R. Allchin, *Neolithic Cattle-Keeper of South India* (Cambridge, 1963).

¹⁰ N. R. Banerjee, *The Iron Age in India* (Delhi, 1965).

¹¹ Lorenz S. Leshnik, "Archaeological Interpretation of Burials in the Light of Central Indian Ethnography," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, XCII (1967), 23-32, and "A Village Community in Central India," *Anthropos*, LXI (1966), 813-830.

¹² Barrie M. Morrison, *The Lalmai-Mainamati Hills; A Political and Cultural Center in the Eastern Bengal Delta*, unpublished mss. This study was carried out under the direction of Walter A. Fairervis Jr., and was financed through the agency of the Thomas Burke Memorial Museum, University of Washington, Seattle. The survey was not as complete as it might have been for it was expected that it would be only a preliminary survey of possible excavation sites. Unfortunately, the difficulties of negotiating a contract to work in Pakistan have prevented any further investigation.

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

painstaking analysis of the composition, weight, and markings of two hoards of punch-marked coins.¹³ He has identified the dynastic and individual rulers' marks and has offered some interesting suggestions about the correlation of weights, wear, and variety of markings upon the coinage which leads to a more reliable dating of the coins and hence of the individual ruler issuing the coinage. The study of sculpture is being expanded and enriched by the researches of scholars who have moved beyond the iconographical studies or impressionistic interpretation of the "spirit" of a particular school of sculpture to more rigorous comparative and contextual studies. These recent developments are to be found in the works of such authors as S. K. Saraswati, Walter Spink, and Alice Boner. Saraswati of Calcutta University has carried out a careful study of one major site, attempting to relate the development of its sculptural forms to cultural and political changes.¹⁴ Walter Spink of Michigan is doing a similar study, though in greater detail, for the famous caves of Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta and others.¹⁵ Boner has carried out a study of the systems of spatial organization in cave sculpture.¹⁶ Each of these studies mark new levels of scholarly analysis in the study of sculpture.

In the analysis of these materials, whether derived from an archaeological site or exploiting the known holdings of museums and galleries, there exist great opportunities to extend and deepen our study of early India. In particular, the material remains promise to increasingly illuminate the variations in the material bases of cultures, the techniques of production, the exogenous influences upon the country, the distribution of religious and political centers and, most important of all, give a definite and concrete locus in time and space for the historic Indian cultures.

Turning to written materials, these are broadly of two kinds. First, there are those treatises, tales, plays, and poems whose intent was to inform or amuse. They tend, on the one hand, to be encyclopedic and, on the other, to be entertaining. They are all generalized statements with little or no trace of any individual personality or of a particular event in the past. The second group are the administrative records which preserve in detail the nature of some past act, where it took place, who did it and how. Representative of this second group would be the copper-plate inscriptions which record the transfer of property or the temple inscriptions memorializing past benefactions. The volume of material included in these two categories exceeds the range of any single scholar. Customarily scholars work in the Vedas, with

¹³ D. D. Kosambi, "Study and Metrology of Silver Punch-Marked Coins," *New Indian Antiquary*, IV (1941), 1-35, 49-76.

¹⁴ S. K. Saraswati, *Early Sculpture of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1962).

¹⁵ Personal communication and Walter Spink, *Ajanta to Ellora* (Ann Arbor, 1967).

¹⁶ Alice Boner, *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture: Cave Temple Period* (Leiden, 1962).

the Purāṇic literature, or with the Dharmaśāstric literature, the Buddhist materials, or the inscriptions. No one since the first generation of European scholars has presumed to claim expertise in the whole range of the written materials for early India.

The first category, that of the generalized materials, is extremely difficult to handle for the historian interested in specific developments in a particular cultural milieu. For example, scholars are still wrestling with the difficulties of extracting historically reliable information from the *Mahābhārata*, one of the Indian epics. E. W. Hopkins, D. D. Kosambi, Franklin Edgerton, Robert Shafer, and V. S. Sukthankar—to mention only a few—have all tried to locate and date the war of Kurukshetra or to discount the historicity of the events.¹⁷ Similarly, the Purāṇic literature has absorbed much of the scholarly energies of such able men as F. E. Pargiter and R. Morton Smith.¹⁸ Although the information yield from such studies has so far been meagre, Smith is exploring new approaches which will hopefully provide reliable information.

My present impression is that the most constructive approach to these texts is by close comparative studies. We have available the work of R. C. Hazra who examined and critically compared the *purāṇas* for the information that they contain on ritual observances.¹⁹ On the basis of his comparison he has been able to present a developmental account of Hindu rites from the second century to about the tenth century A.D. The most important of these comparative studies is that of P. V. Kane, whose comprehensive study of the position of various Dharmaśāstric texts on specific points of civil law so far runs to six volumes.²⁰ He has established a relative dating and made suggestions about the areal distribution of specific practices. This is an advance of great importance in the study of the history of such matters as social relations, marriage, inheritance, and forms of property. While there are many further problems to be resolved before this material can be incorporated into synthetic studies of a society, a major advance has been made.

The second group of written sources are the inscriptions. The most extensive collection of inscriptions is found in the periodical *Epigraphia Indica*.²¹ In addition, there are a number of other journals, such as the *Indian*

¹⁷ E. W. Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India* (New Haven, 1920); D. D. Kosambi, "The Autochthonous Element in the Mahabharata," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXIV (1964), 31-44; F. Edgerton (trans.), *The Bhagavadgita* (Cambridge, 1944); R. Shafer, *Ethnography of Ancient India* (Wiesbaden, 1954); V. S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay, 1957).

¹⁸ F. E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Traditions* (Oxford, 1922) and *The Purana Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age* (Oxford, 1913). Professor R. Morton Smith, of the University of Toronto, described his work during a private conversation.

¹⁹ R. C. Hazra, *Studies in the Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs* (Dacca, 1940).

²⁰ P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra* (Bombay, 1930-).

²¹ This journal has been published irregularly since 1891 with a variable title. Up to the 1940s the editors included facsimiles, photographs, critical texts and translations of most of the inscriptions. More recently, however, they have ceased publishing translations which makes them more difficult to use for the student untrained in Sanskrit.

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

Historical Quarterly and *Indian Antiquary*, which publish inscriptions. There are also series of special publications, such as the six volumes issued by the Tirupati Devasthanam, which reproduce the inscriptions making bequests to the Tirupati temple in Andhra.²² The published inscriptions, which probably number somewhere between three and four thousand, are largely concentrated between the third century and the twelfth century A.D., though there are earlier inscriptions of the Mauryans as well as later inscriptions such as the eighteenth century Nepali copper plates.²³

The inscriptions are commonly incised to record some transfer of property. In many, if not all, of the copper plate inscriptions, governmental agencies are involved as a means of legitimizing and sanctioning the transfer. Thus the plates contain much information about the organization of local administration in different parts of India at different periods. This information has been partially exploited by such writers as A. S. Altekar,²⁴ and R. C. Majumdar.²⁵ Moreover, from about the eighth century A.D. the copper plates have long introductions extolling the power and majesty of the local dynasties, often tracing the descent of the ruling dynasty for three, four, or more generations. These inscriptions have been an important source for establishing the names of dynasties, the succession of rulers, and the dates and principal exploits of the dynasty. Representative of this kind of study is the work of B. C. Sen, *Some Historical Aspects of the Inscriptions of Bengal*.²⁶ The lead of such writers as Sen, Majumdar, and Altekar has been followed by many graduate students in Indian Universities. Much of this work remains unpublished and, regrettably, unreported in the historical journals.

However, while much work has been done on the dynastic and administrative history of India, the inscriptions carry many other kinds of information. Based upon the pioneering work of K. P. Goswami,²⁷ and Sankalia,²⁸ a series of place-names and personal-name studies in the inscriptions of different parts of India have been carried out by doctoral candidates at the Postgraduate and Research Institute at Poona. These studies assume that the variations in the linguistic bases of the place and personal names give indication of early linguistic regions and that variable frequencies in the references to different gods and goddesses, heroes, animals, virtues, etc., both in the personal and place names, can be used as indicators of religious or cultural change.

²² *Tirumalai—Tirupati Devasthanam Epigraphical Series*, 6 vols., (Madras 1931-38).

²³ For the Mauryan inscriptions see E. Hultzseh, *Inscriptions of Asoka* (London, 1925); for the Nepali copper plates see Luciano Petech, *Medieval History of Nepal* (Rome, 1958).

²⁴ A. S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India* (Delhi, 3rd edition, 1958).

²⁵ R. C. Majumdar, *Corporate Life in Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1916).

²⁶ B. C. Sen, *Some Historical Aspects of the Inscriptions of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1942).

²⁷ K. P. Goswami, "Place Names of Bengal," *Journal of the Department of Letters, Calcutta University*, XXIII (1943), 1-70.

²⁸ Cited above, note 8.

Yet another kind of study of copper plates is the one which I have carried out on the inscriptions of Bengal.²⁹ In that study I have compared seventy-two property transfers and have correlated the changes in the character of the property being transferred with a number of other variables—location, date, dynasty, form of political organization, and the social position of the donor and recipient of the property. Three general conclusions have emerged: that it is possible to use the inscriptions for distinguishing periods and regions; that the comparative study of the property transfers in the inscriptions will yield substantial information about historic change in the control and disposition of landed resources; and, finally, that the inscriptions can be used to reconstruct the political and cultural geography of parts of early India. This is the first systematic comparative study of the copper plates which has ever been carried out.

Utilizing another kind of inscription—the records of bequests to the Tirupati temple—Burton Stein has attempted to reconstruct the administrative changes and the fluctuating fortunes of the temple.³⁰ Stein's work and my own both promise to lead to important conclusions about the control and administration of resources in certain localities. If we can encourage the pursuit of similar studies in other regions, it may be possible to reconstruct parts of the economy of ancient India as well as gain some insight into the shifts in the fortunes of various religious institutions.

Clearly, the volume of written sources for the study of early India is large and the systematic and comparative study of much of the material has only begun. Further research will reveal more clearly the forms of property holding, administration, political theory, religious organization, and legal regulations. The inscriptions will provide the localized and dateable information while the texts will provide data on the more complex aspects of the high culture. Eventually it may be possible to trace the rise of the heterogeneous high cultures of South Asia and their gradual fusion into a more universal and coherent Indian civilization. Because of the complementary nature of the written and material sources it should be possible to successfully compare, collate, and verify sources and push our inquiries more deeply than would be the case with any single source material.

Finally, how can the observation of contemporary cultural data be utilized to elucidate earlier cultural process and structure? In this category would be included studies of historical linguistics, of social organizations which have historical continuity (such as the caste system), of persistent forms of the material culture, of place-name distributions, and of development of religious rituals, to mention only a few of the more obvious ones.

²⁹ Barrie M. Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal* (Tucson, Arizona, Publications of the Association for Asian Studies, Monograph Series, forthcoming).

³⁰ B. Stein, *The Tirupati Temple: An Economic Study of a Medieval South Indian Temple* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1958) and "The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XIX (1960), 163-75.

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

Work of great potential interest is being carried out by linguists and linguistic anthropologists. Norman Zide of the University of Chicago,³¹ William Bright of the University of California,³² and others, are engaged in the description of the historical development of language and in the study of the connections between language structure and social structure. If the linguists are able to justify empirically the speculations of Claude Lévi-Strauss as to the structural congruency of syntactic organization and social organization,³³ the historians may find themselves presented with a relationship of profound significance which could be used to distinguish culture groupings and periods. Another way in which presently-spoken languages can be utilized is through modern place-name studies.³⁴ At present I am engaged in a study of the place-names of the Bengal Delta, using the facilities of the Computing Center of the University of British Columbia. With the aid of a research assistant, I have recorded a one-quarter, geographically-distributed sample of the 80,000 place names which the Topographical Survey maps have reported for the Bengal Delta. Even though the names on the maps are often parodies of the pronunciation of the local people and even though there is a skew in the reporting of the names towards more familiar Bengali or Sanskritic names, we have found large variations in the proportion of certain name elements which will allow us to map areas of concentration of Tibeto-Burman, Mundaric, Dravidian, Arabic and European name elements. To give a gross example, the proportion of Tibeto-Burman names in the Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Comilla districts is much higher than in the Midnapore or 24 Parganas districts. This would lead to the inference that, other things being equal, the former districts were settled by Tibeto-Burmans. Moreover, the kinds of topographic terminals with which different linguistic elements are compounded is suggestive. We may illustrate the potential value of this form of analysis from the British period where we have a high proportion of English names associated with terminals such as *ganj* (landing place) or *haṭ* (market) which suggests some connection between English influence, water-borne traffic, and commerce. When we can refine our criteria, we hope to be able to make some statements about the areal distribution and the kinds of activity of different linguistic groups. Indeed, it may even be possible to date, relatively, the advent of different language groups to the Delta by plotting the frequency and types of name-compounding and by recording the frequency with which different languages give names to various geographic and political features.³⁵

³¹ Norman Zide (ed.), *Studies in Comparative Austroasiatic Linguistics* (The Hague, 1966).

³² William Bright, "Social Dialect and Semantic Structure in South Asia," paper read to conference on "Social Structure and Social Change in India, Methods and Results," University of Chicago, June 3-5, 1965.

³³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963).

³⁴ There is, of course, a distinction between place-name studies based on the inscriptions and those based on modern usages.

³⁵ A graduate student at the University of British Columbia, Mr. Essop Mia, is using a simi-

Pacific Affairs

The large number of ethnographic and social anthropological reports provide the most readily available information on important units of social organization—village, caste, and tribe. Such a use of caste data has been made by Ronald B. Inden, of the University of Chicago, who is carrying out a study of the development of the Dakhin Rarhi Kayastha caste in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁶ He has been able to exploit modern caste studies to assist in the interpretation of genealogical and marriage accounts kept for individual Dakhin Rarhi lineages. Similar procedures have been successfully applied by Lorenz S. Leshnik in his study of the present-day material culture and in his use of the work of other anthropologists to illuminate his archaeological studies of village sites.³⁷

The study of contemporary data often allows us to comprehend the complexity of relations which exist in society. It allows us to understand the function of tools, the organization of households, the significance of ritual objects, the operation of the marriage system. However, D. D. Kosambi probably goes too far when he suggests (echoing both the early ethnographers and the Marxists) that the study of living societies, when arranged on a primitive-modern continuum, will allow us to perceive the stages of the cultural evolution of man in India.³⁸ Though we may question Kosambi's position, it is nonetheless helpful for the historian to explore at first hand the range and heterogeneity of human cultures in India or, if this is not possible, to acquaint himself with the ethnographic literature for it provides an unrivalled opportunity to perceive a spectrum of societal development. But while using such data the historian must be most cautious of the assumptions upon which the work of the social scientist is based and sensitive to the limitations of the social scientist's concepts and purposes.

The historian of early India seldom gains more than a fragmentary picture of past society. But from the evidence available he must try to infer the nature of the institutions, the values of the culture, the structural relations, and the society's historical development. The historian must therefore be thoroughly familiar with the analytical concepts and observed regularities found in a variety of societies, both past and present, so that he can identify the societal fragments which he discerns in his source materials. Admittedly this is what historians have always done in an intuitive

lar technique for the place names of Chota Nagpur, where he is finding most suggestive correlations between the linguistic affiliation of the names, the extent of name compounding, and the geographical features with which they are associated. When these studies are complete they will be the first modern place name studies for South Asia.

³⁶ The utilization of these reports was explained in conversation with Ronald Inden. As his work is nearly completed the study should soon be available.

³⁷ Lorenz S. Leshnik, "Archaeological Interpretations of Burials in the Light of Central Indian Ethnography," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, XCII (1967), 23-32; and *Sociological Interpretations in Archaeology* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1964).

³⁸ D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1956), 6-13.

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

way but what is necessary, when scholarship is reaching for higher standards, is an increased self-consciousness in the critical application of our conceptual understandings to the interpretation of the Indian past.

The presently available conceptualizations can be grouped, I believe, into three categories: culture change concepts; total society concepts; and cluster of variables or problem concepts. These categories are in no way mutually exclusive and nearly everyone writing about India makes use of all three categories of concepts with varying degrees of sophistication. The first two categories are of particular importance for they include some interesting approaches to the problem of analyzing Indian materials.

Cultural change concepts include Sanskritization, the Great Tradition-Little Tradition, the Folk-Urban continuum, Modernization, Universalization, and similar concepts. They are distinguished by their concern with the analysis and description of the process of cultural change, whether of the whole of Indian civilization, or of some region, village, or tribe. They are all processural and diachronic. Though their concern is with only one complex process, they lead to continuum construction with the possibility of assigning stations upon the continuum. This, in turn, leads to concepts of development or acculturation taking place along some linearly conceived continuum. Such a simplification has great value for it focuses upon the process of acculturation and thus upon the development of a more coherent universal high culture, or, when applied to smaller units, upon their degree of autonomy from, or assimilation to, the high culture.

Scholars who have contributed most to elaboration of this category of concepts and its application to India have often looked for inspiration to the work of Robert Redfield. Redfield postulated a folk-urban continuum in the Yucatan, through which the complex urban culture, regionally centered in the port city of Merida, spread through a series of communication networks and lesser centers down to the villages such as Chan Kom, leaving virtually untouched isolated aboriginal groups.³⁹ This model was then transported to India by Redfield and Milton Singer, who explored with the aid of younger scholars the applicability of the concepts. A number of interesting extensions and modifications took place. There was defined a "Great Tradition" which occupied the urban end of Redfield's continuum. Attention was focused upon the agencies of acculturation—the Brahmans, the westernized elite of Madras, the Vahivanca Barots of Gujarat—which revealed great diversity and even incompatibility in the cultural norms that were being passed on.⁴⁰ To accommodate this complexity, a distinction was made between orthogenetic high culture, that is, a high culture deriving developmentally from an earlier historic culture, and a heterogenetic high culture, which grouped the high culture elements which appeared to have an alien origin—such as Mughal administrative practices, the party system

³⁹ R. Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (Chicago, 1941).

⁴⁰ Milton B. Singer (ed.), *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia, 1959).

Pacific Affairs

of government, and industrialization. The simplicity of the Redfield model has been further corrupted by the discovery of the anthropologists that many of the elements of the locally prevalent Great Tradition had originated from peasant or tribal practices and could not be regarded as an integral part of any universal high culture. In his last conceptual article, Milton Singer seems to have virtually abandoned the attempt to apply Redfield's original model to India.⁴¹

Compatible with Redfield and Singer's initial concept were the attempts by S. K. Chatterji and M. N. Srinivas to specify a process of acculturation.⁴² Both scholars adopted the term "Sanskritization," the meaning of which is illustrated by Srinivas's use of the term to designate the way in which the leaders of Coorg local society selectively incorporated elements from the encroaching high culture. The Coorg leaders, by adopting some of the distinctions of ritual purity and initiating other practices of the higher castes, attempted to defend themselves against the challenge to their social standing and political authority by the encroaching "Sanskritic" culture. Different terms have been invented by other scholars who observed acculturation to different life styles. Surajit Sinha has used the term "Rajputization" to convey the specific kind of adaptation which the Bhumij tribals have followed in emulating the Rajput.⁴³ Other scholars have used "Westernization," "Paharization," and we may even anticipate such terms as "Bhadralokization" to indicate divergent forms of acculturation. The multiplication of such terms suggests that the original concept of Sanskritization is not capacious enough. From our present vantage point it would seem that any specification of the content of acculturation will only have a particular and limited applicability.

In short, while the acculturation process as a general conception is of great utility in the understanding of change in India, the attempt to work with a simple linear model and to specify any general content of acculturation has failed to cope with the complexity and diversity of India. In an attempt to devise a means of handling these problems, Singer has suggested a spherical model with societal institutions holding stations as nodes in a network along which the cultural traditions flow. This sphere of networks changes in time rather like the inner space and surface of a balloon which may be bent, twisted, and turned, each of which actions alters the distance between the nodes but the whole remains as an interactive complex.⁴⁴ This model is so complex that its potential utility as a guide to analysis

⁴¹ Milton B. Singer, "The Social Organization of Indian Civilization," *Diogenes*, XLV (1964), 84-119.

⁴² S. K. Chatterji, "Kirata-Jana-Krti: The Indo-Mongoloids, their Contributions to the History and Culture of India," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. Letters*, XVI (1950), 143-235; M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Oxford, 1952).

⁴³ Surajit Sinha, "State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India," *Man in India*, XLII (1962), 35-80.

⁴⁴ Milton B. Singer, "The Social Organization of Indian Civilization," *op. cit.*, 91-95.

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

seems questionable. We shall have to await its application before any judgement of its potential can be reached. However, one of the significant features of the work of Singer, Srinivas, and other acculturationists is their concern with what is taken to be a coherent high culture—a civilizational culture. This brings us to the principal interest of those scholars concerned with “total society” concepts.

This second category of concepts includes the ideas of civilizational and national history, infrastructure of culture, regional cultures, and functional societies, all of which are concerned with the basic process and structures of a total society. These conceptions tend to take as their frame of reference the totality of a society, whether it occupies a small ecological niche or the whole of the South Asian subcontinent. While many historians and other scholars use concepts which would be grouped in this category it is not feasible, in the scope of this review, to select for examination more than one specific approach.⁴⁵ One of the most explicitly stated positions is that of Louis Dumont, Professor of the Sociology of India in the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris, and David Pocock, an Oxford sociologist, who began to publish the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology* in 1957. In their statement of purpose they defined, in a manner which some scholars found confusing and dogmatic, a structural approach to what they deliberately called Indological studies.⁴⁶ They postulate that there is an organizing framework for each form of cultural manifestation. For example, in the social organization of India there is a unique framework with a distinctive configuration which in part is represented by the stations in the caste rankings. Similarly, religious ritual, language, aesthetic organization and informal behavior sets all have an independent structure which is peculiar to Indian culture. Dumont puts their general position in these words: the unity of India “consists more in relations than in isolated elements . . . the moment we get from haphazard notes to exhaustive intensive study, and from isolated features to sets of relations between features, the empirical diversity recedes in the background, and an almost monotonous similarity springs forth.” And later: “. . . the constancy which we cannot find at the level of individual beings is very often revealed when we rise to the level of the relations between these beings.”⁴⁷ These underlying sets of relations are thought to be of great persistence and even though the specific details of expression may vary, the systematic configuration remains relatively unchanged. An illustrative analogy, or possibly even an example, would be the way in which lexical items from alien languages are added

⁴⁵ Because of the lack of conscious use of such concepts it would take an unwarranted amount of space to document some of the basic approaches of South Asian historians. For some information on this point see my article, reviewing the work of three social historians writing on Bengal, “Social and Cultural History of Bengal: Approach and Methodology,” *Nalini Kanta Bhattachali Commemoration Volume* edited by A. B. M. Habibullah, (Dacca, 1966), 323-38.

⁴⁶ “For a Sociology of India,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, I (1957), 7-22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10 and 13.

to the Bengali vocabulary without affecting the syntactic structure of the language. In soliciting information about possible archaeological sites from cowherds in the Lalmai-Mainamati hills, we could ask with equal expectation of being understood or misunderstood—"ekhane puranno idkōla khujte parbo?" or "ekhane puranno bricks khujte parbo?" (Will we be able to find old bricks here?). But while Dumont and Pocock argue persuasively for the analytical power of their conceptions, nowhere is it applied in an empirical investigation. Perhaps Alice Boner's study of the structural homogeneity of a number of complex cave sculptures is the nearest example.⁴⁸

As Dumont and Pocock's suggestions seem to lay the basis for a systematic and comprehensive approach to the analysis of total societies, I am attempting to utilize their views in the planning of a study of the Gangetic civilization of the first millenium B.C. Given the limitations of the sources, I can only expect sufficient information on some aspects of the society. Therefore, the study will be concentrated on the structure of societal norms, on the forms of political organization, on cosmology, ritual, iconography, architecture, and technology in an attempt to isolate the diverse traditions and to explore the possibilities of a structural congruency between the traditions. If successful, the study should reveal the composite nature of the cultural traditions which came together in the Gangetic civilization and indicate the way in which the contributing traditions were united into a synthetic civilizational culture. As a preliminary test study, I am examining the variable meanings of the term *Dharma* or *Dhamma* (law, duty, order, etc.) and the specific textual and historic environment with which the various senses of the term were associated. I think this will provide a guide to the wider-ranging analysis of the Gangetic civilization.⁴⁹ If the concentration upon the relationships and their structural correlates yields results then we will be in a better position to evaluate the utility of applying concepts such as those of Dumont and Pocock to historical studies of early India.

What conclusions can be drawn from this discussion? While the intention has been to selectively review the "state" of the discipline as it applies to early India, there are a number of particular points which bear reiteration and expansion.

First, historians seeking to write convincingly about the major changes in Indian history can no longer restrict themselves to one variety of source materials. The scholar must be willing, as well as able, to utilize whatever information can be drawn out of the evidence. With openness of mind and a little persistence the technical competence to handle diverse kinds of evidence—archaeological, numismatic, inscriptional—can be acquired.

⁴⁸ Cited above, note 16.

⁴⁹ This work is being supported by a generous grant from the Canada Council.

Sources, Methods and Concepts in Early Indian History

Second, there are no established and tested approaches to the historical analysis of the Indian past. The scholar is forced to create his own concepts and methods as may be suggested by his individual interests and the nature of the sources which he plans to use. If the experience of the historians of early India parallels that of the Africanists, we may expect to find such methodological innovations as are reported in Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*.⁵⁰ These new methods, from what are still regarded as the esoteric areas of historical investigation, promise to add new approaches and methods to the repertoire of the historian of the West.

Third, early Indian history offers a relatively little-known field of great cultural significance for the investigator. It is one of the remaining *terra incognita* in the world of the historian and it invites the attention of scholars, both Indian and Western, who are attracted by the richness and diversity of Indian life and the opportunity to advance the frontiers of historical scholarship.

University of British Columbia

BARRIE M. MORRISON

⁵⁰ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago, 1965).