

Re-Discovering Indian Chronology

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The mainstream history of ancient India is anchored around an event and a text. Alexander's attack is the event that is definitively dated to 325BCE, as marking the end of a nearly two year's campaign here. The text is Arthashastra by Chanakya, which is a wide-ranging exposition on the society, polity, economy and on the strategy and management of the affairs of state. It was however long lost and forgotten, till someone walked-in and left a manuscript written on palm leaves at the Mysore Oriental Library in 1905 – no one bothered to take note of the person!

This is indeed a scanty base for the ancient Indian history. It is certainly inadequate to construct a robust and comprehensive historical narrative. The archaeologists often bemoan the paucity of hard evidence, in comparison to the similarly dated Greek-Roman and Chinese civilisations. They attribute it to the structures being largely wooden or temporary in early India and that a very few documents have since survived. But the paucity is more apparent than real, as the mainstream historians have ignored or been unable to use the evidence that exists. They needed to dig and search harder, bring all that is available into consideration, devise suitable tools and methods, and perhaps be open to the possibilities of the extraordinary, unexpected and the paradigm shifting.

In the absence of good science, bad theories prevail. The history of ancient India, more appropriately that of Indian subcontinent or South Asia, from being poorly known have transcended to being misunderstood and misinterpreted. Some gross postulates and simplistic conjectures evolved from the mid-eighteenth to early twentieth century by the amateur explorers and empire builders, still dominate the narrative. Or they just hang around and stand convenient to be misused. These need to be put to the test of scientific method, to be either falsified or discredited or be suitably built upon and refined. The situation can be fortunately turned around, possibly quickly and definitively.

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The obvious start will be to prepare the scientifically validated chronology of events in ancient India. A rediscovery orientation, for the fresh and un-blinkered view, will be apt. Some initial attempts portend startling findings, which may throw interesting questions and useful insights for the world at large. This will advance scholarship and bring the Indian chronology at a par to other major regions and civilisations of the world and will further the base for writing true and cohesive global histories. The three-part approach for the validated Indian chronology, along the steps of scientific theory building, is:

1. **Respect all data, find value, filter and compile** The historical India data is actually huge and the sources about the most wide ranging anywhere in the world. The mix and proportions are different, and in areas such as astronomy, mathematics they are unique and outstanding. Archaeological data is relatively lower, particularly from the north Indian plains, but that from the north-western and southern regions abound. The literary data is voluminous, that apparently and proclaim ably extends to the extraordinary antiquity and maintains a degree of continuity and coherence along the time and the spaces of regions, genres, contexts and languages. These are often interspersed with references to the astronomical events, and they have specific and special Indian characteristics – of precisely retaining each syllable, nuance of large texts over millenniums, while not being put onto the conventional mediums of recording history. All of this data from a variety of sources is an important repository, which cannot be trifled with as per the tenets of science and scholarship. They could be of value now or in future, and that seemingly valuable for the purpose of rediscovering Indian chronology can be filtered and put-together. It will expectedly be a burgeoning and amorphous compilation, but more is merrier for the quest at this stage.
2. **Deploy advanced analytical tools and be innovative, assimilative in the hypothesising** The carbon dating was about the principal method of historical chroniclers till early-twentieth century. While it has improved dramatically in veracity and versatility over the past few decades, several others have emerged. For instance, the advances in computing technologies can enable tracking dates up to hundreds of thousand years and to the hour. This comes useful for analysing astronomical references from the Indian texts – which used to appear so obtuse to be termed mythical – and for triangulating across those within a text and across similar ones towards validity. Similarly, genealogies that are available for many thousands of years and across various regions can be scientifically explored, analysed to sift wheat from chaff, and then usefully organised. They can be further aligned with the rich and extensive data from the epigraphs scripted on copper plates, stone and coins, where India has perhaps the largest base and around a hundred thousand have been archived. Moreover, the data and findings from new sources such as genetics, oceanography that have been outlined for periods ranging in

millenniums and the satellite imagery tools that have been used particularly by hydrologists, can be innovatively deployed for validation and extension. All these can be assimilated together to make sense of the most esoteric of data and materials and to hypothesise credibly, boldly and fully, up to the hitherto inconceivable periods – which the early analyses point to for India.

3. Be global, rigorous, exacting on the reconstruction and testing

The Indian hypothesising will surely and inevitably wash onto the evidences and chronologies from the contemporary civilisations, particularly Persian, Greek and Chinese. This is an invaluable opportunity not only to add another layer of rigour and validity to the Indian chronologies, but to advance further on the global history, in terms of consistency and comparability. A plethora of gaps currently exist, in terms of the large differences in narratives across world regions and the missing centuries even millennia within. Some of the blind spots or the incipient mental blocks, for instance the apparent but extreme reluctance to extend world civilisations beyond the 4000BCE, need to be re-examined and overcome. The science progresses through falsification and it is forever on the lookout for new constructs and paradigms. They are to be tested and taken suitably further, without bias, malice, power play or delay. The discipline of history needs to feel the full force and light of the scientific method, and of the best and the latest, in order to correct and update wherever needed. The history of India, and its chronology to start with, could be at the front and centre of such a reconstruction and discovery in the world.

Unlike physical sciences, the social sciences tend to take a meandering and less definitive path in its advance. There is hesitation, confusion and lack of finality in discarding the wrong evidence and theory and in adoption of the superior and next one. Some phenomena and disciplines are often ripe for multiple interpretations and point of views, but history, particularly the chronology, can aspire for and be an exact science. There could be ranges in the estimation of time and events, particularly those far back, but the quest is for the exact and which is always believed to be achievable. For example, the world and Indian chronologies from Renaissance or around 1450CE are exact and beyond any pale of doubt. This can be so for India's prior period too, through the wholesome application of scientific method and tools to the vast data and sources that is at hand, instead of being largely based on a single date and a text.

India's history is currently mired in contradictions and controversies and often descends to partisanship, prejudices and polemics. This extends into the public domain and the teaching in schools and colleges. It also leads to the wrong and distorted sense of identity from the individual to national levels. Thus an official, national commission on chronology needs to be constituted in India.