

Lesson at a Glance

- History is about **changes that occur over time**. It is about finding out how things were in the past and how things have changed in the present. As soon as we compare the past with the present we refer to time, we talk of 'before' and 'after'.
- If someone asks you when people began to drink tea or coffee, you would fail to answer this question. It is because people did not begin drinking tea one fine day, they developed a taste for it over time. Thus, you can only refer to a span of time, an approximate period over which particular changes became visible.
- Still we have enough reason why we associate history with a string of dates. There was a time when history was an account of battles and big events. It was about rulers and their policies. Historians wrote about the year a king was crowned, the year he married, the year he fought a particular battle, etc. For such events, specific dates can be fixed.
- How do we determine that a particular set of dates is important? The dates we select, the dates around which we compare our story of the past, are not important on their own. They became important because we focus on a particular set of events as important.
- In the histories written by British historians in India, the rule of each Governor-General was important. These histories began with the rule of the **first Governor-General Warren Hastings** and ended with the **last Viceroy Lord Mountbatten**.
- **James Mill** was a Scottish economist and political philosopher. In 1817, he wrote a three-volume book, *A History of British India*. In this he divided Indian history into three periods—**Hindu, Muslim and British**.
- We divide history into different periods in order to capture the characteristics of a time, its central features as they appear to us. So the terms through we **periodise**, i.e. demarcate the difference between periods, become important.
- Mill was of the opinion that all Asian societies were at a lower level of civilisation than Europe. According to his telling of history,

before the British came to India, Hindu and Muslim despots ruled the country. Religious intolerance and caste taboos dominated social life. British rule, Mill thought, could civilise India.

- The British classification of the Indian history cannot be justified. It is because a variety of faults existed simultaneously along with Hindus and Muslims in these periods.
- Moving away from British classification, historians have divided Indian history into **ancient, medieval and modern**. This division too has problems. It is a periodisation that is borrowed from the West where the modern period was associated with the growth of all the forces of modernity such as science, reason, democracy etc. Medieval was the term used to describe a society where these features of modern society did not exist. But the features of modern period were not visible in India during the British rule. Many historians, therefore refer to this period as **colonial**.
- The British established their control over India and made it a colony.
- **Colonisation** is a term that refers to a process in which one country subjugates another and thus brings political, economic, social and cultural changes.
- Historians use different sources in writing about the last 250 years of Indian history. One important source is the **official records** of the British administration. The British believed that the act of writing was important. Easy instruction, plan, policy, etc. had to be clearly written up. The British also felt that all important documents and letters needed to be carefully preserved. So, they set up **record rooms** attached to all administrative institutions. Specialised institutions like **archives** and **museums** were also set up to preserve important records.
- The practice of **surveying** also became common under the colonial administration.
- By the early 19th century detailed surveys were being carried out to map the entire country.
- In villages, revenue surveys were conducted.
- From the end of the 19th century, **Census** operations were held every ten years. These prepared detailed records of the number of people in all the provinces of India, noting information on castes, religions and occupation.
- All these are official records. These records do not always help us understand what other people in the country felt and what lay behind their actions.

- To know about these things we have **diaries of people, accounts of pilgrims and travellers, autobiographies of important personalities** etc.
- All these sources were produced by those who were literate. From these we will not be able to understand how history was experienced and lived by the tribals, and the peasants, the workers in the mines or the poor on the streets.

TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS SOLVED

Let's Recall

Q. 1. State whether true or false:

- (a) James Mill divided Indian history into three periods—Hindu, Muslim, Christian.
 (b) Official documents help us understand what the people of the country think.
 (c) The British thought surveys were important for effective administration.

Ans. (a) False (b) False
 (c) True

Let's Discuss

Q. 2. What is the problem with the periodisation of Indian history that James Mill offers?

Ans. James Mill divided Indian history into three periods—Hindu, Muslim and British. This periodisation has its own problem. It is difficult to refer to any period of history as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' because a variety of faiths existed simultaneously in these periods. It is also not justified to characterise an age through the religion of the rulers of the time. What it suggests is that the lives and practices of others do not really matter. It is worth-mentioning that even rulers in ancient India did not all share the same faith.

Q. 3. Why did the British preserve official documents?

Ans. The British believed that by preserving official documents it would be easier for them or any other to know about the decisions taken in the past. One can study the notes and reports that were prepared in the past. Their copies may be prepared and used in present time if needed so.

Q. 4. How will the information historians get from old newspapers be different from that found in police reports?

Ans. The information printed in newspaper are usually affected by the views and opinions of the reporters, news editors etc. But what historians find in police reports are usually true and realistic.

Let's Do

Q. 5. Can you think of examples of surveys in your world today? Think about how toy companies get information about what young people enjoy playing with or how the government finds out about the number of young people in school. What can a historian derive from such surveys?

Ans. For self attempt.

