

The Making of Local *Purānas* in South Western India: A Study of Brahmanical Traditions

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Abstract

In the region of the western coast there existed the growth of the *Paraśurāma* tradition. This tradition narrates the creation of the brahmanical settlements on fertile agrarian zone particularly in the river valleys. This process can be connected with the developments in North India like emergence of feudalism as a result of which there was migration of brahmins to various parts of South India after the Gupta period. There was the transformation of the oral source to a written material. Through these written texts the brahmins tried to claim that they were patronised not only by sage Paraśurāma but also by the king of Kadambas, Mayura Varma. In order to legitimise the appropriation of landed wealth, the brahmins use the *purānic* literature. This benefited them economically on the one hand and raised their social status on the other. The caste *purānas* not only highlight stratification of a society but also stratification within a caste.

Keywords: Traditions, brahmins, agrarian tracts, stratification and migration.

Introduction

The creation of *purānas* was an evolutionary process. It took several years for the authors of the *purānas* to compile the various sections of the *purānic* literature. A cursory look at the characteristics of various *purānas* indicates that all the *purānas* in India did not exhibit the similar features. It is here that we discern certain differences between the *mahāpurānas* and local *purānas*.

Need for *Purānas*: The Historical Experience

The compilation of *purānas* represented the standardisation of Sanskrit tradition of post-Gupta period. Most of the eighteen *purānas* were compiled during the Gupta and post-Gupta period. After seventh century A.D. there was the spread of the greater brahmanical culture of North India to other parts of India, particularly South India. This expansion of brahmanic culture in South India was due to the process of creation of brahmin settlements in the context of the emergence of local kingdoms in South India. After seventh century A.D. there was the emergence of many local kingdoms (Chattopadhyaya, 1997: 217). This process led to the need for legitimacy and integration of the greater brahmanical culture and the original tribal customs of the locality. What was needed was an agency through which a balance could be maintained between the two broad cultures: the brahmanical culture and non-brahmanical culture. It is in this context that we should analyse the creation of certain texts in western India. Broadly we can classify *purānic* literature into greater *purānas* and lesser *purānas*. The greater *purānas* were the eighteen *mahāpurānas* like *Skanda*, *Vishnu*, *Matsya*, etc. They were standardized during the early medieval period. The greater *purānas* incorporated data of certain antiquity. The lesser *purānas* were the creation of local genius and they tried to claim logical link with the greater *purānas* by incorporating certain motifs. Now our concern is with the circumstances and people who contributed to the creation of the local *purānas*.

Purpose and Function of *Purānas*

A study of ancient Indian historical tradition indicates that the evolution of *purānas* represented transfer of authorship from the bards like *sutas* and *magadhas* to the brahmin sages like Vasishta and Bharadhwaja (Thapar, 1986: 361). The bards or the wandering poets who were the earlier owners of knowledge were dispossessed of their claim to early Vedic traditions by the brahmins. It was the latter that put into writing what was hitherto an oral tradition. This enabled them to claim ownership over *purānic* literature. The major function of these *purānas* was to legitimise the rule of royal families of North India. After the Gupta period there was a phenomenal increase in the number of the land grants to brahmins in the core as well as peripheries (Sharma, 1980: 1-56). After seventh century A.D. there was the migration of brahmins from North India to the South. Migration was due to the emergence of regional kingdoms like Kadambas on the western coast. Migration was also due to

the competition among brahmin population since there was increase in the population. Decline of certain urban centres like Ahicchatra in U.P. led to further increase in the migration of brahmins from North India to the South. When the brahmins landed in new localities they did not leave completely their heritage. Perhaps they remembered the greater *puranic* tradition. Now they needed certain instruments of social sanction. They were patronised by the local kings since brahmins through *yagas* and literature legitimised their rule. It was to rationalize the ownership of brahmins over land in the locality that the local *purānas* were composed. Through the creation of *brahmadeyas* the kings allowed the brahmins to become owners of land. These local *purānas* might not have belonged to early historic period. It is possible that some *purānas* were composed in early medieval period and some others were written during the medieval and later medieval period (Saletore, 1936: 36).

Indian Attitude towards Past

Writing on the Indian consciousness of history, a few scholars have averred that Indians lacked a sense of history since they did not maintain systematic records as one can find in Europe or other parts of Asia like China and Central Asian states. However, these scholars did not realise the fact that Indian sense of history was expressed in a rather different way. It was through myths, traditions and chronicles that Indians tried to preserve their history. In the case of ancient India it was the brahmins, the community with the knowledge of reading and writing, who first started preserving historical tradition in written form. Therefore, it was quite natural that European scholars did not find details regarding rise and fall of kingdoms in the Indian historical tradition. Thus the information found in the vedic literature, *purānas* and other regional works, though they mention dynasties and kings, help one to reconstruct social history rather than political history.

The traditions in the Indian context were one way of expressing a sense of history. A sense of history, as Romila Thapar says, is “a consciousness of past events, which events are relevant to a particular society, seen in chronological framework and expressed in a form which meets the needs of that society....” (Thapar, 1978: 268). This sense of history is also revealed in the form of myth, which represents the self-image of a given culture and it expresses its social assumptions (Thapar, 1994: 140). The *puranic* myths represented the group experience of a given society. The myths were transmitted from generation to generation and they represented the sense of history of pre-modern Indians. Through the myths it was easy to preserve the historical traditions and it became a

part of the literate traditions of upper classes in the society. The significance of studying the historical tradition is to identify the relevance of a particular event mentioned in a tradition. The analysis of the structure of a myth can reveal the structure of society from which it emanates. Thus the traditions had a particular function to perform and close analyses of such traditions reveal their purpose.

Myths were incorporated in certain *purānas* that were written during the post-Gupta period. Kunal Chakrabarti has analysed that the *purānas* were an instrument for the propagation of brahmanical ideals of social reconstruction and sectarian interests, a medium for the absorption of local cults and associated practices, and a vehicle for popular instruction on norms governing everyday existence (Chakrabarti, 1996: 64). This statement indicates that the major function of brahmanical tradition was to establish and legitimise a social order which was well suited to the interest of the dominant community. The *purānic* myths or traditions acted as the vehicle of establishment of brahmanical hegemony in the peripheral regions. A glance at the folk literature of the south western India, a region on western coast, reveals that there were several Sanskritic elements which had entered into the non - brahmanical sphere. Perhaps this hegemony of brahmanical religion is symbolised by the co-existence of both brahmanical temples and small shrines of *dāivas* and *bhūias* in a region like South Kanara, a region of western India.

The *purānas* can be broadly categorised into *mahāpurānas* and *upapurānas*. It was the latter category, due to its flexibility, which can be seen in the peripheral regions where the brahmins took some time to establish their hegemony. Though the *upapurānas* made tall claims that they were part and parcel of *mahāpurānas*, they were written during comparatively later time when the brahmins started migrating to peripheral zones.

Traditions as Source for Social History

The traditional schools of thought did not render importance to the use of the traditions for writing history. However, now traditions are no longer ignored simply because they are the fruit of imagination of a particular community in the society; they are looked upon as those unlikely sources from which it is possible to deduce historical phenomena, social changes, cultural divergences and class orientations. Rather than the form of tradition, it is its function which is given more importance for tradition was one way of expressing historical consciousness among ancient Indians.

All over India we discern different varieties of myths regarding the origin of a region, an institution or a community in the society. So also in the western coast of India certain myths were circulated as to explain certain geographical peculiarities or emergence of a caste. The dominant myth found on the western coast concerns with the creation of what is called 'Paraśurāma kṣētra', the land which was created by none other than Lord Paraśurāma. This myth is mentioned in a *mahāpurāna* like *Skanda Purāna*. The dominant communities of the western coast used this tradition. The tradition stated that land was reclaimed by Paraśurāma, who also donated the land to the brahmins. While discussing the Paraśurama tradition we do not intend to speak for or against the historical authenticity of the geographical changes in the western coast. It becomes problematic to locate the historicity of any of the temporal figures like Mayura Varma as mentioned in these traditions. This is because there are limited sources to support the hypothesis that Kadambas ruled the south western India as we know that it was the Alupas who ruled the region called South Kanara, a part of the western India. In fact, going by the inscriptional data it was during the Vijayanagara period after fourteenth century that we find the growth of temple complexes, donations to temples and brahmins by kings and elite communities in society. Here use of the name Mayura Varma indicates the symbol of royal patronage rather than a historical reality. The use of myth regarding Mayura Varma is understandable for we know that before establishing the Kadamba kingdom, Mayura Varma himself was a brahmin. The tradition that Mayura Varma was converted from a brahmin to a *kṣatriya* must have been responsible for the brahmins considering Mayura Varma as their patron. In fact the brahmanical tradition of South Kanara, *Grāmapaddhati*, claims to give a *vamṣaval* or genealogical list of Kadambas who succeeded Mayura Varma.

There is an explicit attempt made by the brahmanical authors to claim justification, in the larger society, for the ownership of fertile agrarian tracts. This variety of myth can be found in the brahmanical texts, *Grāmapaddhati* and *Sahyādri Khānda*. These traditions represent historical consciousness of a particular community. For our purpose, it will be significant to analyse these brahmanical texts. They reflected on those events, which their authors thought would be helpful to determine their position in society. The brahmanical traditional chronicle of the south western India, *Grāmapaddhati*, claims that after reclaiming the land out of the sea by the use of his axe, Paraśurāma donated the land to a section

of brahmins to be enjoyed by them perpetually. It is said that during historical times Mayura Varma donated thirty two villages to some brahmin communities. There are stories of dissent and protest from both brahmanical and non-brahmanical groups. Here one can notice the divergence of the attitude of the text towards two sections of the same society. While the protest of brahmins was treated with tact by donating lands to them, the protest of *śūdras* and untouchables was dealt with firm hand by subjugating and forcing them to work as servants of upper castes in the society. Another brahmanical traditional chronicle, *Sahyādri Khānda*, consists of similar stories regarding occupation of land by brahmins after the donation of land by Paraśurāma. However, this tradition consists of several narratives of fallen brahmin *grāmas*, which shows that within the brahmanical groups there were certain sections which tried to become dominant in the overall structure of brahmanical society. This indicates the need to emphasise not stratification within the larger society, but also stratification within a single case.

Literature and Dominant Caste

An analysis of *Grāmapaddhati* and *Sahyādri Khānda* reveals that these were the brahmanical traditions authored by brahmins who reflected on those events which were considered as important for them. These texts consist of many details like the brahmin family names, their assemblies, their designations and the different activities of the brahmanical society. This shows that their authors were consciously recording such things. The brahmanical claims are sought to be strengthened by such statements as about the reclamation of the land by Paraśurāma, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu himself and arch brahmin, his gift of land to brahmins (whatever their origin), the way in which the kings invited and settled brahmins in the land and the other concerns of the text with brahmins.

Thus here we find the attempt for justification of the position, the social status claimed by the brahmins. There is also an attempt to claim the ownership of large tracts of land on the west coast. As D.D. Kosambi says this ownership of land was facilitated by a collaboration with native communities on the west coast who were the actual cultivators of land, the produce of which was ultimately appropriated by the brahmin landlords (Kosambi, 1975: 328-329). The statement in the *Grāmapaddhati* that the peasants such as *nādavar* or *nāyars* were brought from Ahicchatra by Mayura Varma himself acquires better sense in this light. So also, the way in which the fallen brahmins or the defeated *chandālas* were

accommodated as farm peasants or farm labourers as given in the text can be explained in this way. Thus these traditions represented the expression of the needs of the brahmin landlords. The brahmins tried to justify land ownership and dominant social position in the society. Along with the control of the temples and the land owned by those institutions it was possible for at least a section of the brahmin community to accumulate properties. Both had to be legitimized. Apart from the entire ideology supporting caste and the hegemony of brahmins, traditions such as those contained in the texts went a long way. The land itself is sacred because Paraśurama created it. The brahmins were themselves the creation of Paraśurāma. Mayura Varma, the ruler, himself had gone all the way to Ahicchatra to get the brahmins here. His successors had to prevail upon them on more than one occasion to come back. In fact, on the final occasion such an important person as Bhattācharya had to persuade an accompany them. All this shows the eagerness of brahmins to show their importance.

Origin and Growth of Parasurama Tradition

The story of the origin of *Paraśurāma kṣētra* must have had, to begin with, an oral origin. It was put into writing to meet the needs of a particular community in the society. It is possible that the migration of brahmanical groups might have been responsible for the spread of this tradition throughout the western coast. The studies made by Pargiter showed that Paraśurāma represented *brahma-ksatra*, who combined the characters of both a Brahmin and a Ksatriya (Pargiter, 1997: 199). Similarly, we can consider Mayura Varma belonging to the same tradition since initially he was a brahmin himself and later he was converted into a *ksatriya*. It is possible to identify the Paraśurāma tradition in various regions of South India. J.S. Rao says that all the regions indicated as inhabited by brahmins as a result of exploits by Paraśurāma still abound with adherents belonging to brahmanical castes and sections who owe their allegiance and relate their origin to their settlement through Lord Paraśurāma's exploits in their respective regions (Rao, 1976: 17). He also gives the example of the brahmin settlements of the *sapta konkana* region in the western coast, Bengal, Assam in the East, Kanauj-Maithila-Vāranasi in the Northern U.P. regions, Rajasthan and Vindhya Pradesh in the central region and Gujarat and Kutch in the north west region which still trace their origin to the exploits of Lord Paraśurāma (Rao, 1976: 17). There were changes that took place in the Paraśurāma tradition and it did not remain stagnant during the course of time.

Transformation of the Tradition

The above study shows that a tradition popular as oral might have been put into writing and as time passed new additions were made to the story. It also shows the story of Paraśurāma's exploits as popular in *Sūrparaka* and there might have been a geographical movement of this story to other regions like the Konkan coast, regions of coastal Karnataka and Kerala. Along with migration of brahmins there was also migration of brahmanical traditions. The brahmin authors of *Grāmapaddhati* claim that they migrated to the western coast from Ahicchatra (*Ahikṣētra*), which can be located in U.P. During the post-Gupta period with the decline of urban centres of North India, it is possible that brahmins migrated to South India. Pressure of population on land must have been the major cause of migration of the brahmanical groups. This phenomenon of migration is seen in the Agastya tradition in the Tamil country (Rajagopalan, 1998: 21-30). With the migration of brahmins to the south, there was sanskritization and brahmanization of a non - brahmanical society. This is reflected in the local Tulu dialect which was adopted by the majority of brahmin populace of South Kanara. The Tulu spoken by brahmins consists of large number of Sanskrit words.

Thus some of the elements of Paraśurāma tradition which was oral to start with and reduced to writing in the document form obtained acceptance through inscriptions. In later years certain images in the temples came to be believed as installed by Paraśurāma. The authors of different *sthalamahātmyas* also used this tradition. The places like Rajatapitha (Udupi), Kumaradri, Kumbhakāśi, Dhvajeshwara, Kródha, Mukāmba and Gökarna are considered as creations of Paraśurāma. *Kēralótpatti*, a traditional chronical of Kērala, also claims that Kērala was the creation of Paraśurāma (Veluthat, 1978: 4).

The depiction of Paraśurāma tradition in literature shows that there was certain connection between Paraśurāma, his creation of land and his donations of land to brahmins. The study of geo-morphology and paleo-archaeology of the western coast, however, would lead us to an altogether different direction of analysis. But since we have not used archaeological data, our present concern is entirely with brahmanical texts and their analysis. The above survey goes to suggest that the story of the origin of *Paraśurāma kṣētra* which had an oral origin was put into writing to meet the needs of a particular community in the society. This tradition, when applied by the authors of traditional history of the regions, conveyed the

functions of justification of brahmin's position in the society of the western India. We can find such functions in the brahmanical texts, *Grāmapaddhati* and *Sahyādri Khānda*.

Content of Traditions

The authors of *Grāmapaddhati* and *Sahyādri Khānda* gave utmost importance to the brahmins. Paraśurāma, after creating the land, donates it to the brahmins. These brahmins lose their caste and privileges since they irritated Paraśurāma by trying to test him. Later Mayura Varma and his successors donated villages to brahmins brought from Ahicchatra. There are references to brahmanical assemblies where the brahmins were expected to assemble and discuss issues of *varnāśrama dharma*. *Grāmapaddhati* also gives a list of brahmin families who are supposed to have settled in the thirty-two villages in South Kanara with ownership of land. Such grants of villages gave the brahmins the economic control over the rural areas. *Sahyādri Khānda* gives details about several groups of brahmins who are supposed to have migrated to South Kanara.

This brahmanical tradition also comprises details regarding non-brahmanical communities. There is reference to the *Mogers* (fishermen) who were converted as brahmins. They were given all privileges of brahmins. But as they were silly enough to test Paraśurāma, their benefactor, they lost their status, privileges and land.

In all Indian situation we find that soon of the tribes were incorporated into the caste structure and they were given the status of brahmins and assigned a *gōtra* but had a low rank within the status group (Thapar, 1993: 28). The *Maga* brahmins, the *Abhira* brahmins and the *Boya* brahmins had low caste status in the North Indian society. In Tulunādu, the *Mogers*, after being cursed by Paraśurāma, lost their brahmanical status and they became equal to the *sūdras*. This forced the king Mayura Varma to bring chaste brahmins from Ahicchatra and these brahmins were assured of all necessary facilities. When Mayura Varma abdicated the throne, the Ahicchatra brahmins returned to their original place as they found this country anarchical. However, they were persuaded to come back to Tulunādu by Chandrāngada, successor of Mayura Varma, indicating that the brahmins became indispensable for the kings of Tulunādu. The protection of life and property of brahmins was also guaranteed. This indicates the expectation of the brahmanical authors regarding their position in the larger society.

Another community represented in *Grāmapaddhati* are *nādavas* or *nāyars* who were peasants and considered as *śudras*. There one can find co-operation between the *śudra* peasants and brahmins. Not only are the brahmins given villages but they are expected to be assisted by *nādavas* in agricultural activities. For this act the *nādavas* obtained *nadus* (independent agrarian unit). All business activities were carried through *nāyars*. Thus with the help of the *śudras* the brahmins were able to exercise control over land. This land ownership was also accompanied by ownership over the tribes who were converted as servile farm labourers who were expected to serve the brahmins without anything more than subsistence wages.

Certain episodes in *Grāmapaddhati* show the protest of those who were described as fallen brahmins against bringing of other brahmins and their establishment. These brahmins questioned the authority of Mayura Varma to do it, who being a kind person satisfied them by giving them some *gramas*. Another episode of protest is seen on the side of the *chandālas* (lowest in the caste hierarchy of South Kanara), who are described as being led by a *chandāla* chief Hubbāsiga. He jeopardised the position of the brahmins and they ran away to their earlier place. But this protest was put down and after their subjugation, these people were made *holeyas* (menial servants) to work as servile farm labourers in the land owned by the brahmins. These details in *Grāmapaddhati* show that it includes not only the details about brahmins, but also about *nādavas*, *nāyars*, *mogers* and *holeyas*. But these are presented from the point of view of the brahmanical groups. This indicates the attempt made by the brahmins to claim the highest position in the society as a whole.

The *Sahyādri Khānda* also gives the details about conversion of *mogers* into brahmins. It considers that Ahicchatra brahmins were pure brahmins. But it refers to other types of brahmanical groups most of whom were fallen brahmins. Some of the fallen brahmins, since they lost their earlier caste status, had to depend on agricultural and horticultural activities. Another important factor we find in *Sahyādri Khānda* is the reference to inter - caste marriages. There are situations where a brahmin married a *śudra* girl, but those who are born as a result of such marriage are considered as fallen brahmins. There is also reference to *sankara jātis*. This reference indicates the continuation of reference to mixed castes in brahmanical text, *Manu Smṛiti*.

In the above brahmanical texts the authors attempted to claim superior social status for themselves in the larger society. In order to

validate the ownership of land by brahmanical groups, which had come from outside, it was found necessary to put these traditions in literate form and present the brahmanical groups as those communities who had every right to own large tracts of land since it was given by Lord Paraśurāma who was not only an *avatāra* of Vishnu but also was responsible for the reclamation of this land out of the sea.

Conclusion

These works represent the sense of history as reflected in Indian historical tradition, and they recorded those aspects or events, which would strengthen their position in the society. Whatever events they recorded, were those which they considered relevant for their existence in the society as a whole.

That, however, does not make these traditions any less valuable. In fact, by preserving the memories of the group experience of these sections, the *Sahyādri Khānda* and *Grāmapaddhati* incorporated an historical tradition in a strong way. These two texts should be seen in the context of the emergence of brahmanical communities in the western coast and their need to strengthen their respective position in the society. The domination of brahmins is also a sign of the emergence of a feudal society. It was an age when the state was losing its control over administration over peripheries, particularly the village administration. In this sense the brahmin villages were emerging self-sufficient and free from the control of the state officials since they were donated by the kings to the brahmins for their enjoyment in perpetuity. The ownership rights over the villages gave claims for the brahmins over the non-brahmanical sections in the villages. Brahmanical settlements were the surest ways for the state to propagate its ideology. The sacral power was able to dominate the particular psyche of the community as a whole. The brahmanical traditions standardized the hegemony of both the state and the brahmins.

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