

THE NATURE OF THE BRAHMANICAL TRADITIONS OF INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The British administrative historians who came to India, to their surprise, found that Indians lacked a sense of history. This realization went a long way in facilitating the British to put forward the theory of Imperialist deviation, that the Imperialists were destined to teach the Indians the sense of history. This also facilitated in building up 'superiority complex' in the British historiography regarding the Indians' lack of historical scholarship. Imperialist historiography justified the narrow definition of sense of history in the context of Indian history. But in the context of available evidence this thesis cannot be allowed to remain unchallenged.

IMPERIALIST ASSUMPTIONS OF INDIAN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The pro-Imperialist Historians identified only *Rajatarangini*, written by Kalhana as having some historical value. They thought that the reason for the lack of historical literature was either that the historical works, written by Indians must have been lost on account of the destruction of original manuscripts or that the Indians had never attempted to record their past. But since they found no reference to these historical works in other contemporary and later works, they rejected the first probability and accepted the latter. This assumption can be emphasised in the statement made by Macdonell who said, "History is one weak spot in Indian literature" (1900:10).

FALLACY OF EUROCENTRICISM

The Imperialist scholars did not consider the possibility of differences between the Indian sense of the past the sense of the past in western society. The sources for the reconstruction of the history of western society and the history of Indian society are different from each other. The divergence of cultural formations in different societies makes it impossible for the historian to look for similar kinds of attitude towards the past in different societies. The problem with earlier scholars, who wrote on Ancient Indian History, was that they tried to compare the Indian and western

societies on the basis of the models which were borrowed from the west. The Indian historical tradition was different from that of the west because people living in each of these societies chose to record only such events as were regarded by them as relevant. In so recording the events, the people may have had certain purposes. The historiographical tradition in pre-colonial India was not influenced by that of the west (1978:268-298).

INDIAN HISTORICAL TRADITION

In discussing the tradition of historical writing in pre-modern India, Romila Thapar makes a distinction between what she calls "embedded history" and "externalized history" (1994:134). "Embedded history" refers to forms of expression the central purpose of which is not the recording of the past but a consciousness of the past can be still prised out of them. Analysing the different situations described, the historian can still reflect on the past. The best example of embedded history is origin myths which have the significant function of justifying a particular section in society (1994:142). At the same time they are the carriers of the information about happenings in the society. A critical analysis of such myths reveal their purpose and significance of their propagation.

In "externalized history", on the other hand, one can notice rather explicit narration of events. The puranic genealogies represent such types of history (1994:138). But even these historical narratives are not devoid of the function of legitimizing a particular group or groups in the society. The distinction between "embedded history" and externalized history" indicates the changes that take place not only in different societies but also in the same society over a period of time.

TRANSITION FROM ORAL TRADITION TO THE LITERATE TRADITION

As a proof of changes taking place in the society we find variations in the expression of historical consciousness in the form of oral and literate means. The oral tradition is used in societies which found no use for writing their lore down. When the art of writing was introduced in the society which gradually started having the need for it, the historical consciousness also started getting reduced to writing. This transformation is represented by what is termed as *itihasa-purana* tradition (1990:297).

The *itihasa-purana* tradition represents the transition from oral tradition to literate tradition. Its starting point can be found in the vedic literature which is oral in nature and its culmination we find in the puranic literature which was also oral to start with but was later put into writing. For several years the *puranas* remained in oral form and was reduced into writing in the mid-first millennium A.D. (1986:361). Pargiter has demonstrated how some of the *puranas* were translated from oral prakrit to literate Sanskrit (1972:77). This shows that they represent a transition from the oral tradition to the literate tradition. The firm establishment of expressing the historical consciousness could be found in the *puranas*. The oral tradition of the earlier poets called *Suta* and *Magadha* was appropriated by the brahmanas and that they realized the value of literary adaptation of this oral literature and by using it they intended to enhance their position in the society. Infact, it was these brahmanical authors who formed the social base of the *puranas* and it was they who altered the *puranas*, added and deduced the things from the *puranas* as the situation demanded. The brahmanas through their writings desired to establish their identity in the society. And with the expansion of agriculture we find their desire to hold large tracts of land, and with their help the kings also wanted to extend their territories and influence those people in the newly occupied areas who respected the brahmanas for their knowledge. Thus during the post-Gupta period, we notice the brahmanas appropriating both social and economic prerogatives.

CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF BRAHMANICAL TRADITIONS

It was during this period that there occurred a change in the historical traditions in form of *caritas* and *vamsavalis*. Such forms of historical writing were necessitated by the emergence of the local ruling families and the decentralisation of power. Instead of earlier Maurya or Gupta empire, now there were smaller local kingdoms in Rajasthan and South India. The smaller states emerged in Rajasthan during the seventh century A.D. As Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya says, "All ruling dynasties became regional..." (1994:9), and during this time there was a necessity for inclusion of all these extra lineages into the mainstream. Some of the Rajasthani tribes became 'Rajputs' after they were regarded by the brahmanas in the *caritas* and *vamsavalis* as belonging to Chandravamsa and Suryavamsa (1993:31). In South India the

Colas claimed to be Suryavamsi and Pandyas claimed to be Chandravamsi. Still interesting is the case of the Pallavas who claimed to be Brahmaksatra for their *vamsavalis* averred that they were originally brahmanas prior to assumption of powers (1972:17). All these claims were made with the help of local *puranas* which maintained its links with earlier puranic references and genealogies.

BRAHMANICAL TRADITIONS IN THE WEST COAST

These local *puranas*, *sthala mahatmyas* and caste *puranas* were linked with each other by the use of common motifs. This technique is used in the case of Western India. We find reference to Parashurama in *Skanda Purana* and this motif of Parashurama is used by all the local *Puranas* in the west coast. They use the common tradition of Parashurama creating the land in the west coast by pushing the sea backwards. *Sahyadri Khanda*, which claims to be a part of *Skanda Purana*, mentions the story of Parashurama creating the land in Konkan, Karnataka and Kerala coasts. It also narrates the story of Parashurama donating the newly created land to the brahmanas thereby justifying the ownership claims of brahmanas over Parashurama *kshetra*. It also mentions the story of Mayura Varma bringing the brahmanas afresh from Ahicchatra and making them settle in different parts of the western coast, as the old brahmanas to whom Parasurama had gifted the had lost their caste and the land. We find such stories with variation being included in the local *Puranas* of Kerala and coastal Karnataka.

The local *Puranas* and *sthala mahatmyas* like *Sahyadri Khanda*, *Gramapaddhati*, *Gokarna mahatme*, *Velapura mahatme*, and *Visvadarshana* use the common motifs of Parashurama, Mayura Varma to the brahmanas and also the brahmanas praising of Mayura Varma. The authorship of these local *Puranas* is ascribed to the Rsis who are supposed to be the authors of greater *puranas* like *Skanda Purana*. Thus the literary traditions of the earlier *Puranas* was maintained and continued even in the regional *Puranas*. The main intention of this continuity of puranic tradition is legitimacy and validation of both the brahmanas and the local ruling families. This intention is clearer in the accounts of brahmanas of South Kanara, *Gramapaddhati*, which is supposed to narrate the story of brahmanas of South Kanara who claim descent from Ahicchatra.

THE UTILITY OF THE TRADITIONS FOR THE BRAHMANAS

The linking of regional histories with the larger *Puranas* exhibits the purpose of the brahmana community to claim ownership rights of the agricultural tracts on the west coast. The land hungry brahmanas received patronage during Gupta and post-Gupta period through land grants, *brahmadeyas* and *devadanas* and these land grants began to be issued not only in North India but also in South India by the dynasties like the Kadambas, the Pallavas, the Rashtrakutas, the Colas and other major and minor dynasties of South India. For one thing the land grants and creation of *agraharas* and *brahmapuris* went a long way in legitimizing the regional dynasties that had emerged during the post-Gupta period. Secondly, the land grants satisfied the land hungry brahmanas who respected the temporal authority by including the genealogies of these local rulers in the larger *Puranas*. We find details of Rajput rulers being included in *Skanda Purana* (1994:61), the same practice we can observe in South India. The Kadambas of Banavasi had established *agraharas* in Talagunda and Kuppatturu (1975:238), and Talagunda inscription states that Mukkanna Kadamba established thirty-two brahman families in the *agrahara* of Sthanagunda. There are evidences to prove that a branch of the Kadambas had established their power in North Kanara (1982:74-75). Thus the practice of creation of *agraharas* was carried on effectively by the regional dynasties like the Kadambas in North Kanara and Alupas in South Kanara. In South Kanara starting from 7th-8th centuries A.D., we find the grant of lands to the brahmanas as well as temples (1970:274), the property of which was appropriated ultimately by the brahmanas. These inscriptions prove that there occurred the expansion of brahman control of land in South Kanara. During the period of Alupas Shivalli was an important brahmanical centre (1970:292), and during the later period i.e., by 12th century A.D., the neighbouring villages like Brahnavara and Nilavara also acquired importance (1988).

Thus the above details go to prove that there was ownership of large tracts of land by the brahmanas in South Kanara. In order to justify the claim it was felt necessary to include this aspect of land being given to the brahmanas from an authority which is unquestionable and unchallengeable. This is one purpose we can notice in the traditional chronicles like *Gramapaddhati* and *Sahyadri Khanda*.

The above two works mention that land, after created by Parashurama, was given to the brahmanas of this region and even in the years to come we find the brahmanas claiming that they are the real owners of this land since it was given to them by sage Parashurama himself. This sacred authority was supported by the land grants by temporal authority, Mayura Varma.

Here we have tried to argue that the sense of history in the case of the Indians has expressed in manner which is different from the western view of history. Record of the past was conceived as something which would further the cause of the communities in the society. It is in this context that the brahmanas realized that knowledge is power. The brahmanical traditions responded to the change that were taking place in the society and attempted to adjust with these changes.

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