

## THE HISTORICAL TRADITION OF SOUTH KANARA AND THE BRAHMANICAL GROUPS

by  
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Studies on Indian history have traditionally concentrated on the question of the nature of the sense of history in India. Historians, including the British administrative historians and the Indian nationalist historians, have participated in the discussion about the degree of the sense of history possessed by Indians.<sup>1</sup> This discussion has resulted in the attempt to define the sense of history. In discussing the tradition of historical writing in pre-modern India, Romila Thapar makes a distinction between "embedded history" and "externalized history".<sup>2</sup> "Embedded history" refers to forms of expression, the central purpose of which is not just the recording of the past; but a consciousness of the past can be still prized out of them. Analyzing 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 providing a justification for a particular section or group of people in society.<sup>3</sup> In "externalized history" on the other hand, one can notice the rather explicit narration of events. The Puranic genealogies represent such types of history.<sup>4</sup> But even these historical narratives

1. C. H. Philips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London, 1961), p.4; A. A. Macdonell, *History of Sanskrit Literature* (London, 1900), p.10; Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi, 1978).
2. Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India* (Delhi, 1994), pp.137 ff.
3. *Ibid.*, p.142.
4. *Ibid.*, p.138.

are not devoid of the function of legitimizing a particular group or groups of persons in society.

While discussing the lack of historical consciousness among Indians, foreign scholars tended to argue in a particular framework which suited their interest in legitimizing British rule in India. The European scholars put forward the theory that Indians lacked a reasonable sense of history, a consciousness of the past, when compared to other societies. This attitude is best represented by Macdonell, who said, "History is one weak spot in Indian literature. It is in fact non-existent".<sup>5</sup>

The argument of the Colonial writers failed to take into consideration the basic nature of the historical consciousness of Indians, which is different from the historical attitude expressed by western societies. The Indian historical tradition is different from that of the West because the 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 aims and purposes. The ancient Indian historical tradition has been termed as the *itihasa-purana* tradition.<sup>6</sup> The composition of the historical tradition became, in the course of time, a profession of certain communities in society, like the brahmana poets and bards, who realized the importance of ownership and propagation of knowledge. This went a long way in legitimizing the position of the ruling class, which patronized the brahmana poets, who in turn, composed eulogies, *prasastis*, in praise of the rulers. The Kshatriya dynasties sought legitimacy, which was provided by the brahmanas, who connected these Kshatriya families with genealogies of earlier sacred texts, which also provided validation to the additions that were made therein at different points of time.

The realization of the advantages of this purposeful historical tradition maintained by dominant social groups became an all-India

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5. A. A. Macdonell, *Op. cit.*, p.10.

6. Romila Thapar, "Origin Myths and the Early Indian Historical Tradition", in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, p.297; Also, Cfr. Romila Thapar, "Society and Historical Consciousness: The *Itihasa-Purana* Tradition", in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar (eds.), *Situating Indian History for Sarvepalli Gopal* (Delhi, 1986), p.361.

phenomenon. In order to validate the authority of the rulers, who came up during any period, the *vamshavali* of these rulers was constructed. On such occasions, it became necessary to include the new lineages into the existing Puranic genealogies. For instance, some of the Rajasthani tribes became 'Rajputs' after they were regarded by the brahmanas, in the *caritas* and *vamshavalis*, as belonging to Agnikula race. The tribes of the Bhils and Gond ruling families claimed to belong to the Chandravamsha and Suryavamsha.<sup>7</sup> This was done with the help of the composition of local Puranas which maintained their links with the earlier Puranic texts and genealogies.

These local Puranas, *sthala mahatmyas* and caste Puranas were linked with each other and with earlier Puranic texts by the use of common motifs. This technique has been used extensively in Western India. For example, we find a reference to Parashurama in the *Skanda-Purana* and this motif of Parashurama has been used by all the local Puranas on the west coast, which utilize the well known tradition of Parashurama creating new land on the west coast by pushing back the sea. *Sahyadri-Khanda*, which claims to be part of the *Skanda-Purana*, elaborates the story of Parashurama creating new land on the Konkan, Karnataka and Kerala coasts and also narrates the story of Parashurama donating the newly created land to brahmanas - thereby justifying the ownership claims of the brahmanas over Parashurama-*kshetra*. It also mentions the story of Mayura Varma bringing brahmanas afresh from Ahicchatra and making them settle in different parts of the west coast, since the former brahmanas, to whom Parashurama had gifted the land, had lost their caste and their land. We find such stories, with variations, being included in the local Puranas of Kerala and of coastal Karnataka.

The local Puranas and *sthala-mahatmyas*, like *Sahyadri-Khanda*, *Gramapaddhati*, *Gokarna-Mahatme*, *Velapura-Mahatme* and *Vishva-darshana* use the common motifs of Parashurama, Mayura Varma and Ahicchatra. They relate the story of the donation of land by Parashurama and Mayura Varma to the brahmanas - with the brahmanas praising Mayura Varma. The authorship of these local Puranas is ascribed to the Rishis, who are supposed to be the authors of the greater Puranas like the *Skanda-Purana*.

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7. Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice* (Delhi, 1993), p.31.

Thus the literary traditions of the earlier great Puranas was maintained and continued even in the regional Puranas. The main intention of this continuity in the Puranic tradition was legitimacy and validation - both of the brahmanas and of the local ruling families. This intention becomes clearer in the accounts of the brahmanas of South Kanara in the work, *Gramapaddhati*, which is supposed to narrate the story of the brahmanas of South Kanara who claim descent from Ahicchatra. *Gramapaddhati* even makes a claim to give the *vamshavali* of Mayura Varma, although in reality no such *vamshavali* is given. These regional histories however, constitute another part of the Indian historical tradition and they maintain the links with the earlier Puranic genealogies.

The linking of these regional histories with the universal sacred Puranas exhibits the intention of the brahmana community to claim ownership rights on the agricultural tracts on the west coast of India. Firstly, the land-grants and the creation of *agraharas* and *brahmapuris* went a long way in legitimizing the regional dynasties that had emerged during the post-Gupta period.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the land-grants satisfied the land-hungry brahmanas who displayed their respect for the temporal authority by including the genealogies of these local rulers in the sacred Puranas.

The practice of creation of *agraharas* was carried on effectively by the regional dynasties - like the Kadambas in North Kanara<sup>9</sup> and the Alupas in South Kanara. In South Kanara, starting from the 7th-8th century A.D., we find grants of land to brahmanas as well as to temples,<sup>10</sup> the property of which was ultimately appropriated by the brahmanas themselves. Inscriptions of this period prove that there occurred increasing brahmana control over the land in South Kanara. During the period of the Alupas, Shivalli was an important brahmanical centre.<sup>11</sup>

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8. Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, 1994), p.9.

9. Regarding the establishment of the rule of the Kadambas in North Kanara, See, B. R. Gopal, *Minor Dynasties of South India: Karnataka*, Vol.I. (Madras, 1982), pp.74-75.

10. K. V. Ramesh, *A History of South Kanara* (Dharwad, 1970), p.274

11. *Ibid.*, p.202.

The above discussion goes to prove that there was indeed ownership of large tracts of land by the brahmanas in South Kanara. In order to justify this possession of land, it was felt necessary to include this aspect of the land being given to the brahmanas by an authority which was unquestionable and unchallengeable. This seems to be the aim of traditional chronicles like *Gramapaddhati* and *Sahyadri-Khanda*.

Francis Buchanan, who came to India during the initial years of the 19th century, says that the Tuluva brahmanas consider themselves as the "proper lords of the country".<sup>12</sup> He also says that brahmanas "pretend that the country was created expressly for their use by Parashurama..."<sup>13</sup> Thus, these traditions, while being the composition of the talented imagination of the brahmanas, served the purpose of justifying their land ownership rights.

### The *Gramapaddhati* and the Brahmanical Groups

The *Gramapaddhati* is a traditional chronicle, containing the history of the brahmana settlements in the Tulu country.<sup>14</sup> This author has been able to consult three versions of the *Gramapaddhati*.

One of them is a printed version, the source or the original manuscript of which, has not been acknowledged by the editor,<sup>15</sup> and this version we label as [GP 1]. It is written in the Kannada language though it also contains several Sanskrit *shlokas*. A second version, which we label as [GP 2], is preserved in the University of Tübingen, found among the papers of the Basel missionaries, who worked in the Tulu country.<sup>16</sup> It is written in the Kannada language and script. A third version, which we label as [GP 3], in palm manuscript form, is available

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12. Francis Buchanan, *Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (Madras, 1870), pp.213 ff.

13. *Ibid.*, p.224.

14. The historic Tulunadu included the present South Kanara with the adjoining regions like Kasaragod which at present are included in the Kerala state. Cfr. P. Gururaja Bhat, *Studies in Tuluva History and Culture* (Kallianpur, 1975), p.5.

15. It is published by Holla Krishniah, Balanadu in 1924.

16. I am grateful to Prof. B. A. Vivek Rai for his permission to use the photocopy of this version which he had procured from Tübingen University, Germany.

in the Department of Kannada, Mangalore University (Mss.No.79).<sup>17</sup>

*Gramapaddhati* claims to form part of *Sahyadri-Khanda*, which is again considered to be a part of the *Skanda-Purana*. This indicates the attempt of the authors of *Gramapaddhati* to claim authenticity on account of Puranic origins.

In the early parts of *Gramapaddhati*, we find the narration of Parashurama creating the new land from the sea. Subsequently, when the brahmanas from the other regions refuse to go to this newly created land, on the plea that this new land is not peopled by brahmanas, Parashurama becomes angry and decides to create brahmanas by himself. Thus he transforms the local fishermen into brahmanas by investing them with the threads of jute and donates to them the new land.

In the second part of *Gramapaddhati*, there are details of some protests and even rebellions, floating in weightless space, the spatial and temporal coordinates of which cannot be pinned down. It mentions the rebellions by the original inhabitants under the leadership of the Chandala chief, Hubbasiga.<sup>18</sup> It mentions the protests on the part of the earlier brahmanas who were estranged by the decision of Mayura Varma to bring brahmanas from Ahicchatra.<sup>19</sup> While the rebellions of the Holeyas<sup>20</sup> is suppressed ruthlessly, the protests of the brahmanas is met with compromise.

The next part of *Gramapaddhati* refers to the settlement of brahmanas in thirty-two *gramas* along with a mention of their family

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17. This Department has other versions of *Gramapaddhati* in palm leaf manuscript form. They are (1) Mss.no.44 in Naninnagari script, Gramapaddhatiya Kelavu Manetanagalu. (2) Mss.no.78, Gramapaddhati. (3) Mss.no.59., Vyasa et al., Sahyadri Khanda Mattu Itara Visayagalu.
  18. For traditions regarding Hubbasiga cfr. Purushothama Bilimale, *Koragara Samskriti* (Bangalore, 1993), pp.29-33.
  19. Ahicchatra is also referred as Ahikshetra in other contexts - in the same text as well as in other texts of *Gramapaddhati*.
  20. Chandalas and Holeyas are aboriginal groups in the society of South Kanara. Their antiquity can be proved by the fact that they speak a version of Tulu which belongs to the archaic language category - which is not understood by other Tulu speaking people of South Kanara. Cfr. Purushothama Bilimale, *Op.cit.*

names. It is possible to identify these different *gramas*, for there are traditions continuing in these villages, where the brahmana families and their traditions survive to this day.<sup>21</sup>

Accordingly, the brahmanas were settled in eighteen villages of Haiva, thirty-two villages of Toulava and sixty-four villages in Kerala.<sup>22</sup> Along with the brahmanas, were also brought Shudras to work for them. They were named Nayars,<sup>23</sup> and were kept under the control of the brahmanas. While this arrangement was being made, the fallen brahmanas, who had earlier been converted into brahmanas and were later cursed, protested against it. Mayura Varma, as a matter of charity, did not punish them, but instead, devised a *Sanketa-Paddhati* by giving them the following villages: 1. Nagura-grama, 2. Mattina-grama, 3. Kushasthali-grama and 4. Svasthi-grama. They were named in accordance with the village in which they were settled. But they were brahmanas only in name and their position was, in reality, that of Shudras.

In order to make the Shudras cooperate with the brahmanas, Mayura Varma gave two *desas* to the Sudras and those, who settled in the *nadus* of these *desas*, became the *Nadavas*. These *nadus* were divided into Kelanadu - Nalavattanadu - Halasanadu - Yaradunadu, and the Shudras were settled there as *Nadavas* to enable them to assist the brahmanas at the *agraharas*.

After some time, the terrorist activities of Hubbasiga forced the brahmanas to return to Ahicchatra. After Hubbasiga was killed in a tricky manner, Lokaditya decided to bring the brahmanas back from Ahicchatra. He approached Bhattacharya, who accepted his request and persuaded the brahmanas to proceed to Parashurama-*kshetra*. In Gokarna,<sup>24</sup> with

21. Out of the thirty-two villages mentioned, I was able to identify twenty-nine villages. They are located in the present South Kanara district and in Kasaragod of the present Kerala state.
22. For narrations regarding the brahmanical traditions in Kerala, Cfr. Kesavan Veluthat, "Brahman Settlements" in *Kerala Historical Studies* (Calicut, 1978).
23. In South Kanara, we find references to the *nairi* community in South Kanara - Cfr. Alphonsus D'Souza S.J., "Economic and Social Conditions of the Nairis of Dakshina Kannada", in *Samaja Shodhana*, Vol.2, October 1993.
24. At present Gokarna is situated in the North Kanara district.

the objective of donating land to brahmanas, a sacrifice was performed in front of Lord Mahabaleshvara. Along with land donations, two brahmanas from Kota village<sup>25</sup> were given the *tantritva* and the right to perform *puja* at the Mahabaleshvara temple.

The last part of [GP 1] gives a list of the different brahmana households, their grades, their duties and their powers. It mentions Bhattas, Agnihotris, Smartas, Sabhapatis, Panditas, Prabhus, Tantris, Gramanis, Adhivasis, Pakshanathas and Jannis.

[GP 2] consists of two parts: details regarding the division of villages, the names of the brahmana families and their designation, etc. are found in the first part. The second part of this document is named '*Mayura Varma Vamsavali*' and it is written in the Sanskrit language in Kannada script. In this document, the brahmana families are graded into *atyuttamaru* (highest grade), *yerdane uttamaru* (second grade), *madyamottamaru* (middle grade) and *viprottamaru* (good brahmanas). Shrautas and Smartas belong to the first grade. Bhatta, Tantri and Pandita belong to the second grade. The middle grade are Pakshanathas, Sabhapatis, Ballalas, Annagramanis, Gramanis, Janni and Adhivasi. Loukikas belong to the last grade.

[GP 2] also mentions that Chittupadi Ballalas were Pakshanathas for the eastern sixteen villages and Nidamburu Ballalas were Pakshanathas for the western sixteen villages. Sabaraya and Sibaraya were the *Sabhapatis* for the eastern and western villages respectively. Vappantaya and Pijattaya were *Panditas* for eastern and western villages respectively. The function of *Pakshanathas* or *Pakshanayakas* was to look after the *caturvarna* system of the country. Their assembly was regulated by the *Sabhapatis*. These *Sabhapatis* were given suggestions by *Panditas* regarding *smriti*, *shastra*, *prayashcitta* and *karma* (action). There were twenty-four *Shrauta-agnihotris* and sixty-four *Bhattas*. The *Tantris* were responsible for the management of the temple, *kshetras*, *naga-brahma-bhutas*, *agama*, *mantra-shastra*, *kala-shastra*, fairs and festivals. *Jannis* are heads of the temples. They were expected to be served by *adhivasis* and *adhivamsis*. All these brahmanas would meet at Kuta Narasimha temple and Shivalli Ananteshvara temple.<sup>26</sup>

25. It is situated in the present South Kanara district.

26. Shivalli and Kota are situated in the Udupi Taluk of the present South Kanara district.

[GP 3] contains certain interesting details regarding the traditions of the fallen brahmanas, e.g. the story of the Kotesvara brahmanas. It states that there was a controversy between the brahmanas of Kotesvara and Kota regarding the ownership of a certain land. The Kotesvara brahmanas used a cunning method by digging the ground and hiding a Kotesvara brahmana there and when the Earth (*bhumi*) was questioned as to who owned the land, the brahmana answered that it belonged to the Kotesvara brahmanas.<sup>27</sup> But an *asarira-vani* (a voice without a physical body) revealed the cunningness of the Kotesvara brahmanas and cursed them to become fallen brahmanas.

### *Sahyadri-Khanda* and the Brahmanical Groups

The *Sahyadri-Khanda*, which claims to be a part of the *Skanda-Purana* is intimately connected with *Gramapaddhati*. In *Sahyadri-Khanda*, which is written in Sanskrit, one can find direct Puranic connections. There is an elaborate description of the creation of Parashurama-*kshetra*.<sup>28</sup> *Sahyadri-Khanda* gives more importance to mythological narrations and also to the stories of the different varieties of fallen brahmanas.<sup>29</sup> Here we find information on the immigration of brahmanas from different parts of India and most of these immigrated people are described as fallen brahmanas.<sup>30</sup> Some of the fallen brahmanas are purified by converting them to Vaishnavism. This may point to the post-Madhvacharya date of this text. The brahmana family names, found in different versions of *Gramapaddhati*, are not to be found in the *Sahyadri-Khanda*, the purpose of which seems to be different. The purpose of *Gramapaddhati* was to claim a certain antiquity for the brahmana groups of South Kanara and a certain respectability on account of their origins; their settlement in different villages and their internal migration within these villages was also narrated. The purpose of

27. Cfr. Ko. Sha. Karanta, *Kuta Maha Jagattu* (Saligrama, 1958), pp. 25-26. Some of the families of Kotesvara brahmanas have now settled in Iddya, near Suratkal. It is said that the Kotesvara brahmanas were made followers of Sode Math by Vadiraja Swami. Cfr. P. Kuppanacharya, *Sri Guruvara vadirajara Charitamrita* (Kinnigoli, 1983).

28. J. Gerson Da Cunha, *Sahyadri Khanda - Skanda Puranantargata*, (Bombay, 1877).

29. *Ibid.*, Chapter 20, Ksetra Mahatmya.

30. *Ibid.*, Chapters, 10, 12, 13, 15, 18, 19.

*Sahyadri-Khanda* on the other hand, seems to be the recording of the immigration of the brahmanas from Ahikshetra and from other areas as well. The authors of the *Sahyadri-Khanda* would also like to impose some control on these newly immigrated groups.

The sixth chapter of the *Sahyadri-Khanda* refers to the land donations made by Lord Parashurama to the brahmanas. The brahmanas like Karnata, Maharashtra, Tallanga, Gurjara, Kanyakubja, Cittaputa, Payosniti who were born in Aryavarta, Kanchi, Kaushala, Saurashtra, Devarashtra, Indukacca and Madhyama brahmanas on the banks of river Kaveri, also brahmanas of Abhira, Dravida, Dakshinapatha, Avanti, Magadha and brahmanas from Ahikshetra and also brahmanas with the name Citpavana were given land donations. It also narrates how these brahmanas became fallen and how they were cursed by Parashurama that they should become dependents of the Shudras and the Kshatriyas. The other chapters of the *Sahyadri-Khanda* also narrate stories of the other fallen *gramas*. These brahmanas were made to settle in places which were situated around the Sita river, the Suktimati river, near Kotilingeshwara, and the Chakra river. Brahmanas of Gorashtra were settled in Belanjiti which is situated to the north of the Sita river.

In the 20th chapter, there is a description of different varieties of brahmanas. There are Aryavartas, so named, because they had come from Aryavarta. There are Pragjyotishas, who are described as Aryas and they make predictions regarding the future.<sup>31</sup> There are Garadas, who are Anaryas, and Yamalas, who had come from Yamala. Those, who had come from the desert region are the Konkanas, who eat fish. There are also Devarashtriyas and Padikas and *Sankara-jatis* also.<sup>32</sup>

In *Gramapaddhati*, not only are the Shivalli brahmana families mentioned, but each of these families is associated with a particular *grama*. These details are lacking in the *Sahyadri-Khanda*, which gives instead a list of extra *gramas*, which are considered as fallen *gramas*. In *Sahyadri-Khanda*, there is a direct reference to the Madhava saints

31. *Pragjyotisha* here is wrongly understood as prediction of the future. *Pragjyotisha* means aspects related to the East. Cfr. Sir Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary* (Delhi, 1981).

32. *Sankara-jatis* evolved out of the inter-marriage between the castes leading to the pollution in the existing *jati* system. Cfr. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State* (Delhi, 1990), pp.107-108.

and their proselytizing activities with regard to the fallen brahmanas. This shows the attempt of the Vaishnava Maths to bring the different brahmanical groups under their authority.

The *Sahyadri-Khanda* refers to the immigration of different types of brahmanas like those from Gowda-desha, Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Kasmira, etc. This text takes into consideration not only South Kanara but also other parts of Parashurama-*kshetra* as a place of immigration of brahmanas from outside territories.

It is possible to identify the immigration of different brahmanical groups into South Kanara, like that of Gowda Sarasvats,<sup>33</sup> brahmanas from Kashmir<sup>34</sup> and brahmanas from Kerala.<sup>35</sup> This immigration of the different brahmanical groups has been recorded by the authors of the *Sahyadri-Khanda*.

On the one hand, the *Sahyadri-Khanda* preserves the memories of these immigrated groups with regard to their connections with the territories where they had lived earlier. On the other hand, the *Sahyadri-Khanda* reveals the psychology of the brahmana authors of this work - their attitude of contempt and jealousy towards these groups as also their sense of insecurity. This work also reveals the tensions that prevailed in that society between the different brahmanical groups themselves.

It is possible that the various stories regarding the degradation of some of the brahmana caste groups were included with the purpose of curbing the interests of certain brahmanical communities.<sup>36</sup> Even though it contains the features of a sacred Puranic text, it is yet useful as a source to identify the different groups who immigrated into South Kanara and also the attempt of one group to establish its superiority over the

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33. A. K. Priolkar, *The Goa Inquisition* (New Delhi, 1961), p.xii.

34. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol.VII, No.376. Also, Cfr. K. G. Vasanthamadhava, "Pracina Karnataka Mattu Kasmira", in *Sadhane Sanchike-2* (Bangalore, 1974), pp.107-110.

35. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol.VII, No.190.

36. It mentions, for example, the story of the fallen brahmanas, the Patalis who are also known as Sthanikas. Dr. Gururaja Bhat has shown that Sthanikas were, in reality, a part of Shivalli brahmana communities themselves. Cfr. P. Gururaja Bhat, *Tulunadina Itihasadalli Sthanikaru* (Udupi, 1966).

others. Again, the story of Parashurama-*Kshetrotpatti* attempts to validate the brahmanical hold over large tracts of land to which the brahmana communities claimed ownership. This work represents the historical consciousness of the Indian people at that time. It may be noted that only those things have been recorded, which were considered essential for the promotion of the dominance of certain caste groups over the others in society.

Thus we find that in these brahmanical texts, the brahmana authors have attempted to claim for themselves a superior social status in the wider society. Besides, in order to validate the ownership of land by the brahmanical groups, who had come from outside, it was found necessary to put these traditions in a literate form and to present the brahmanical groups as those same communities, who rightly own large tracts of land, since it was given to them by Lord Parashurama himself, who was not only an *avatara* of Vishnu but was also responsible for the creation of this new land out of the sea. Thus, these works represent a sense of history, as reflected in the Indian historical tradition, though they recorded only those aspects or events which would strengthen their position in society. The events they recorded, were those which they considered as important and relevant for their existence and status in society.

This, however, does not make these historical traditions any less valuable. In fact, by preserving the memories of the group-experience of these sections of society, the *Sahyadri-Khanda* and the *Gramapaddhati* were indeed preserving an authentic historical tradition while re-enforcing it. The above study therefore demonstrates that the cynicism with which pre-modern Indians have been denied a historical tradition cannot be acceptable.

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