



Historical Consciousness in Ancient India

GANESH RAJAK
Dept. of History
University of Delhi

Cradling one of the most ancient civilizations of the world and nurturing a myriad of societies, religious and cultural traditions since antiquity, Ancient India continues to inspire awe and attract a lot of historiographical attention. The trove of this rich heritage got duly represented in Indian Literature-Puranic genealogies, narratives, ancient lores, biographies, Buddhist Pali canon and Jain 'pattavalis', official annals and 'nilopitu' (state papers), all blending into a unique historical tradition where historical facts intertwined with legends, epics and mythological customs.¹

However, despite of the striking amplitude of literature pertaining to the past, Scholars and historians have remained divided in their opinion about the historical sense of the ancient Indians, particularly the Hindus. As early as in 1030 AD, Alberuni, in his Tarikh-Al-Hind, expressed reservations about the historical and chronological Sense of the Hindus, which according to him was invariably replaced by 'Tale- telling'.²

The expression of historical consciousness, as has been correctly pointed out by Romila Thapar³, takes the form of historical writing reflecting the kind of society from which it emanates. With the beginning of the modern writing on early India, colonial Indologists and orientalist came to delineate basic features of Indian culture and civilization. One of the central allegations labelled on the epistemological orientation of the Hindus was a 'lack of historical sense'.

Criticism for the 'Lack of historical sense'

A.B. Keith is lamented on the 'Miserable Representation' of history and the lack of a 'Critical Historian' in the whole of the great period of Sanskrit literature⁴. Ancient Indian history has been fashioned out of compositions which are purely religious and priestly, which notoriously do not deal with history and which totally lack historical sense⁵. Scholars like L.J Trotter, W.H. Hutton, H. Beneridge and A.S. Macdonell have complained about the lack of formal and national history in India-making it a 'weak spot in Indian literature'. According to them, India wrote no history because it never made any.

Vincent Smith, writing in the first decade of the 20th century, like his predecessors James Mill, and to an extent Montstuart Elphinstone, blames the lack of historical consciousness on the static nature of Indian society and a 'Discouraging environment' for writing history. The continuous presence of petty state, absence of unified political system, absence of popular participation in local affairs and the unchanging self-sufficient village economy (eventually giving rise to notion of Oriental despotism and Asiatic mode of production) were considered the Central characteristics of an 'inferior' Indian (Hindu) Civilization, rendering a very anti- historical degenerative quality to it.

¹ F.E Pargiter 1962, Ancient Indian Historical Tradition, pp. 1-2

² G.P. Singh 2004, Evolution of Indian Historical Tradition

³ Romila Thapar, 2000, Cultural Past, Ch -7, Society and Historical Consciousness: The Itihasa- Purana Tradition, p. 123

⁴ E. Sreedharan, 2004, A Textbook of Historiography, p. 309

⁵ F.E Pargiter 1962, Ancient Indian Historical Tradition, p. 9

In general, Western opinion, National feeling and its concomitant popular action which were considered important aids to writing history were not evoked in India even by foreign invasions (upto 1200 AD) by the Persian, Greek, Saka, Parthian, Kushana and the Hunas. In fact, it was this lack of national unity and political freedom which allowed repeated foreign invasions to take place and hindered the development of a shared sense of historical consciousness among Indians.

However, political factors alone could not be cited as reasons for the dearth of historical sense. It must be located on the broader canvas of the beliefs and mental attitudes of the people. It is often argued that the Brahmanas who were responsible for writing and recording, never felt any inclination to 'Chronological historical' events. J.W. McCrindle, a renowned authority on ancient India, argued that despite the abundance of voluminous and varied literature, history was visibly absent⁶. Great public moments passed unrecorded casting a dark shadow of historical ignorance in Sanskrit literature. Even some Indian scholars like S.R. Sharma and R.G. Bhandarkar believes that except for Kalhan's Rajatarangini of 12th century CE, no authentic historical work in the true sense was produced in India before the coming of the Mahomedans.⁷

One of the fundamental notions of history is the role of 'Human agency' in the study of past and material circumstances in human affairs, which makes it possible in the present to learn from the past⁸. In other words, the study of man's actions in the past helps us understand the forces, choices and circumstances of the present. However, if one discerns the major Indian systems of thought and belief i.e. Hindu, Buddhist and Jain, he will find the excessive dependence on the ideas of 'Karma', 'Rebirth' and 'Almighty fate', manifesting in a strong inclination towards 'Other- Worldliness'⁹. These doctrines invariably mis-heed the importance of human agency as events are seen not as a result of man's actions, but rather of a 'premeditated destiny'.

The notion of time and the historical circumstances in which it developed also draw the ire of foreign scholars on the anti- historical nature of ancient India. Hindu conception of time, reflected in schools of thought like Samkhya, Vedanta and the Nyaya, posed a problem of definite chronology. At one hand, time was measured in microseconds and hours like 'Yama', 'Nadika', 'Vinadika', 'Muhurta' etc. While on the other, in Eons like Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kaliyugas¹⁰. The accepted idea was of a fixed order of things and values where in the cycle of time moved from one yuga to another and each successive yuga ushering regression in society.

Historical knowledge is the knowledge of past events in which changes are understood in terms of cause and effect, related to an index of time¹¹. But the Indian belief in an 'Absolute and External Reality' beyond change as well as lack of a universal standard chronology posed a naked confrontation to the European linear notion of time and chronology.

Thus, it is not surprising that no ancient Indian historical work or creation is considered as relevant as other works of past produced in classical word like 'Histories' of Herodotus, 'History' of Polybius, Works of Thucydides, 'Annales' of Livy or Tacitus of Rome.¹²

⁶ J.W. McCrindle, Ancient India (Megasthenes & Arrian)

⁷ R.G. Bhandarkar, 2015, A Peep into the Early History of India.

⁸ Philosophy of History, Stanford University (Plato.stanford.edu)

⁹ E. Sreedharan, 2004, A Textbook of Historiography, pp. 310-311

¹⁰ E. Sreedharan, 2004, A Textbook of Historiography, p. 314

¹¹ D.D Kosambi, An Introduction to the study of Indian History

¹² Michael Grant, 1995, Greek and Roman Historians p. 96

E.J.Rapson believes that the development of the art of writing history in ancient India was limited to its rudimentary stage i.e. in Epic poems, stories of sages and old heroes and dynastic lists, unlike ancient Greek and Roman civilizations which have proper records of political progress.

However, to indulge in un-scrutinized intercultural comparative historiography would raise fundamental methodological problems. One must avoid taking Western cultural tradition of historical thinking as a yardstick to measure historical consciousness¹³. Each civilization had its own cultural identity and historical wisdom and to expect the same character of historiography from each of them would tantamount to overlooking their originality.

Max Muller has rightly pointed out that the task of history is to provide a comprehensive knowledge of the past which Indian sources don't lack at all. In fact, ancient Greek and Roman historians produced only political histories but ancient historians of India provided a wholesome understanding of the social, economic, political, religious and cultural fabric of the subcontinent.

Some of the exemplary works of ancient Indian origins like Puranas, Banabhatta's 'Harshacharita', and other Sanskrit and Pali literature have been considered only semi/quasi historical due to the blurred distinction between historical facts and myths or legends¹⁴. However, as A.E. Wardman has pointed out, the 'myth' and 'legends' constituted an important element in Greek historiography too, so much so that it was used to illustrate the truth advanced by their historians.¹⁵

Thus, in comparing ancient Indian historiographical traditions with those of Greek and Roman, we should prevent stereotypes of cultural peculiarity from becoming guidelines for locating historical sense¹⁶ and Scholars must present these historical traditions of different cultures, peoples and Societies in the context of similarity and difference.

Arguments in Support of Historical Sense

Maurice Winternitz supports India's sense of history reflected in, for example, the numerous accurately dated inscriptions found in ancient India. However, he argued that Indians in their writing of history never knew how to keep facts and fiction apart. But, in my opinion, rather than dwelling in the cult of facts¹⁷ (which would essentially make it a positivist venture), we need to understand that history is necessarily a re-enactment of historians' mind of thought¹⁸, which not only reflects empirical evidence of the past, but also the modes of knowledge, the ways of representation and imagination by a particular society. As far as fiction is considered, the significance of it lies more in the self-image of a given culture expressing social assumptions¹⁹.

A number of historians, like A.K. Warder, U.N. Ghoshal, A.D. Pusalkar, Radha Kamal Mukherjee, R.C. Majumdar, R.C. Dutt, Radha Kumud Mukherjee and Romila Thapar²⁰ have spoken in favour of India's historical consciousness. In fact, in the last quarter of the 19th century, Nationalist historiography came up as critique to the colonial allegations of changelessness of Indian society. Propagating the ideas of democracy, self-government and the 'Golden Ages', and Nationalism (During

¹³ Jorn Rusen, Some Theoretical Approaches to Inter- Cultural Comparative Historiography pp. 5-6

¹⁴ E. Sreedharan, 2004, A Textbook of Historiography, p. 317

¹⁵ A.E. Wardman, 1960, Myth in Greek Historiography, p. 403

¹⁶ Jorn Rusen, Some Theoretical Approaches to Inter- Cultural Comparative Historiography

¹⁷ E.H. Carr, 1961, What is History, p. 9

¹⁸ R.G. Collingwood, 1946, The idea of History,

¹⁹ Romila Thapar, Cultural Pasts, p. 125

²⁰ Romila Thapar, 2013 The Past Before Us,

Gupta age), the nationalist historians changed the contours of Indian history by laying bare a plethora of new sources²¹.

Romila Thapar makes a distinction between 'Embedded history' and 'externalised history'²². Embedded history is where historical consciousness can only be extracted with effort as in myth, epic and genealogy. Externalised history, on the other hand, exhibits a more evident historical consciousness, as in chronicles of regions or biographies of figures of authority. If we understand history as a mode of reflecting about the past, we can argue that sense of history is present in the branch of early Indian literature i.e. in the 'Itihasa-Purana' tradition. There existed forms of oral traditions in a crude and vague stage in the Rigvedic times that included 'Gatha' and 'Narasamsi' (hero lauds), 'Akhyana' (historical narrative e.g. Devasuram, Paripalavani) 'Itivratta' (traditional account of men and things in the past), 'Vansa' and 'Vansanucharita' (Royal genealogies)²³. These can be included in the embedded form of history which also included 'Dana stutis' or hymns in the praise of gift composed by bards in 2nd millennium BCE, Rigvedic times. Contemporary to these were the 'Vinagathins' or lute prayers written to commemorate Raja's ritual and heroic accomplishment.

These oral traditions were then absorbed in the itihasa-purana tradition, often described as the fifth Veda mentioned in the Atharvaveda, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the Upanishads in the first millennium AD²⁴. Etymologically, puranas signifies ancient lore while itihasa means 'verily, thus it happened'. These, though not proper history, do contain past events arranged in the form of stories in which moral duties, worldly wellbeing, desire and final communion with god are duly exemplified. The structure of the puranas was to provide an integrated world view of the past and present. The historical epicentre of Itihasa tradition was the 'Vansanucharita' or dynastic lists. The 'Bhavishya' was the first purana to give an account of dynasties of kali age, and the 'Matsya', 'vayu', and 'Brahmand' got their accounts from it. Besides presenting an excellent critical study of the puranic text, these dynastic lists have considerable accountability in historical sense^{25,26}.

The great epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, apart from containing valuable information about the socio-economic, political, religious and cultural milieu of the time, also reflect the historical process of change. For example, the concern for enduring problems of rulers gave way to legitimization by genealogies. The Mahabharata contains genealogies of 'Lunar line' (Chandravamsha) while the Ramayana contains genealogies of 'Solar line' (Suryavamsha). These epics also contain genealogies of sages (Bhrigu). While these genealogies may not be literally true, they do reflect an attempt to capture and order the past i.e. 'Historical Consciousness'.

More clearly recognizable historical tradition emerged in early medieval (post- Gupta) period, known as 'Charita' (prashastis) or historical 'Kavya' - a historical epic or ornate biography developing in the milieu of royal courts²⁷. Ashvagosha's Buddhacharita was the first creation of this type which went on to include other important works like Banabhatta's Harshcharita, Atulya's Mushikavamsa, Padmagupta's Navasahasankacharita, Bilhan's Vikramadevacharita and Jayanaka's Prithviraj Vijaya.

A case in point is Banabhatta's Harshacharita²⁸ which is considered a masterly historical work describing the events of its time. Though the author seems to have invented speeches and even

²¹ Upinder Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century

²² Romila Thapar, Cultural Pasts, p. 123

²³ A.K. Warder, 1973, An Introduction to Indian Historiography

²⁴ G.P. Singh, Evolution of Indian Historical Tradition

²⁵ F.E. Pargiter, Ancient Indian Historical Tradition

²⁶ Ibid, 1913, The Purana Text of The Dynasties of the Kali Age

²⁷ J.A.B van Buitenen, 1973, The Mahabharata: The Book of the Beginning

²⁸ Upinder Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century

situations for his main characters, but as in Thucydides, we may claim for Banabhatta, that each such oration may have represented the substance of the actual incident. Besides, Banabhatta provides valuable historical information about contemporary life such as men and women of different caste and classes, ploughing rice and wheat crops, sugarcane enclosures, Persian wheels, animals, agriculture and other livelihood practices, travellers and so on.

Another historical work of immense significance to scholars and laymen alike is Kalhan's Rajatarangini (River of kings). This consists of eight books, each called a 'Taranga' (wave) and is composed in Sanskrit verse. It contains an account of the rulers of Kashmir, from the earliest ones to those of the 12th century CE. Kalhana drew on a range of sources such as monuments, coins, inscriptions, royal orders, manuscripts and his family members and his own recollections of recent times. Rajatarangini's awareness of evidence, interest in causation and sequential narratives made it a significant work of history²⁹³⁰. R.C. Majumdar correctly pointed out that Rajatarangini shows the high framework of historical knowledge reached by ancient Indians.

Parallel historical traditions of the time included Jain's 'Pattavalis' and Buddhist monastic chronicles like 'Dipavamsa' and 'Mahavamsa' of the mid-1st millennium CE. Buddhist not only maintained records of the past but also developed a system of chronology where major events were dated in terms of the number of the years from the death (Mahaparinirvana) of Buddha. Other methods of dating included the use of regnal years under the Mauryan ruler Ashoka, the Vikram era (58 BCE), Shaka era (78 CE) and Gupta era (319-20 CE), which signifies that the cyclic notion of time was not the only method of perceiving history and chronology by the ancient Indians.³¹

It is not merely the genealogies, biographies and chronicles of kings but there are also other materials of history that received the attention of ancient Indians. Kautilya's Arthashastra mentions that the duty of the Gopa (state official) was to record all important events and put them in a writing which constituted the source material for history.³² Kautilya also testifies to the presence of archives in Mauryan court. Hiuen Tsang, during his stay in the Indian subcontinent from (629-45AD), noticed the maintenance of written records by state officials known as 'Ni-lo-pi-t'u' (state annals and papers). This practice continued for centuries after Hiuen Tsang. The existence of the historical chronicle of Kashmir, Gujarat and Nepal³³ support the belief and is testimony to the fact that historical facts were recorded and maintained in royal archives by various states though all of them may not have survived the onslaught of a number of invasions or natural calamities.

The inscriptional records also reflect the historical and chronological sense of the ancient times as most of them are dated and throw light on a number of socio-economic and cultural aspects along with the events during the reign of a particular king. The information supplied by Harishena in 'Allahabad pillar inscription' about the conquest and campaigns of his patron Samudragupta (335-375AD) and by Ravikirti in 'Aihole inscription' (634AD) about the achievements of Pulakesin II, the Chalukya ruler of Badami (610-43AD), vindicates their sense of history. Moreover, the ability to write history is reflected from many such inscriptions like those of Ashoka, King Kharvela of Kalinga, Rudradaman of Junagarh, the Satavahanas, Samudragupta, Harsha, Palas, Senas, Chalukyas, Rashtrakutas, Pallavas, cholas and Hoysalas. Amongst the non-literary sources, even the coins of various rulers and dynasties give us dates of rulers and events. In other words, by the middle of 20th century, new conceptual

²⁹ J. Allan, History of India

³⁰ Wolseley Haig, The Cambridge History of India

³¹ John Faithful Fleet, Historical Times of the Musalman Conquest of A.D. 1318

³² E. Sreedharan, A Textbook of Historiography

³³ James Tod, Annals and Antiquities, Travels in Western India

historiography and alternative perspectives aided by the use of inscriptional data, archaeology and coins further pointed out that histories get influenced by the intellectual climate of the time.

Thus, if changing forms of historical consciousness symbolises historical change, then Itihasa- Purana-Kavya tradition pointed out to three phases in the unfolding of early Indian history- (i) Lineage societies, wherein historical consciousness was embedded (ii) focus on dynastic power and supremacy of state and (iii) post- Gupta period with legitimization of status of ruling families.³⁴

To conclude, history writing in ancient India was more of an art rather than a scientific undertaking. The Value of the works produced by ancient Indian historians should be judged by the standard prevailing in the contemporary age rather than the modern ones. Even texts that invoke divine forces and narratives are set in cosmological time embedded with a commentary on their present, while at the same time giving an account of the past. Thus, it is necessary to take into account some fundamental considerations about historical memory of the ancient Indians, its influencing factors, procedures and functions and only then can one gauge the various ways in which historical sense found its due place in the early history of India.

References

1. E. Sreedharan: A Textbook of Historiography
2. F.E. Pargiter: Ancient Indian Historical Tradition
3. G.P. Singh: Evolution of Indian Historical Tradition
4. Romila Thapar: Cultural Past
5. Michael Grant : Greek and Roman Historians
6. Upinder Singh: A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From Stone Age to the 12th Century
7. A.K. Warder: An Introduction to Indian Historiography
8. E.H. Carr: What is History
9. Jorn Rusen: Some Theoretical Approaches to Inter- Cultural Comparative Historiography
10. A.E. Wardman: Myth in Greek Historiography
11. R.G. Collingwood: The idea of History
12. Romila Thapar: The Past Before Us

³⁴ Romila Thapar, Cultural Past, p. 148