



Pre-Colonial Vernacular Historical Traditions in India

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The search for indigenous histories of early India began in the 18th century in various parts of the subcontinent with the beginning of colonial rule. European view of history was influenced by the thinking of the European Enlightenment. They believed that there was no historical consciousness among Indians and their consciousness and tradition didn't belong to those categorized as "Histories" in the European sense of the term. Indian culture and particularly the Sanskrit articulation of what came to be called Hindu culture was defined as Ahistorical. Although, colonial writers and commentators recognized that India possessed ancient traditions to write about the past but these are loose, untidy and irrational which are far beyond qualifying the status of proper history. As per the words of David Shulman, Velcheru Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, the works of history written in both classical and regional language in India were not dull enough to count as historical narrative. The modern concept of History as a scientific and rational- intellectual practice which developed in academic institutions is usually traced back to 19th century Europe and is regarded as a quest for 'Past reality' based on rational and verifiable evidence which had to be judged by developing a carefully cultivated objectivity.

However, the only exception they found was the 12th century text named "Rajatarangini" i.e., 'History of Kashmir' written by Kalhana, which is regarded as first Historical works. European scholars saw India as a Hindu and Sanskrit civilization and hence set aside the numerous chronicles written largely in Persian by court poets and chronicles of the Turkish, Afghan and Mughal rulers. These authors acknowledge a common classical source in the Greek tradition and share more recent history of political encounters during Crusades. Thus, the writing practices of these authors were closer to European conventions of history writings. But these were regarded as alien to Indian civilization, even though these Persian histories of India comprised the overwhelming part of the 'History of India as told by its own historians' and their contents concerned about Indian society and politics and the people whom they wrote about had settled in India to become part of Indian society. However, as Partha Chatterjee says these Persian chronicles remained confined to the military and administrative activities of Sultans and their officials and didn't strike roots in the indigenous, local and vernacular traditions of retelling past. V. Narayan Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam argue that History are embedded within the non-historical genres such as poems and works within the larger Itihasa-Purana tradition. They gave an example of "Dupati Kaifiyat", a Telugu text by an anonymous Karanam author of the early 19th century. Partha Chatterjee says it is a text that appears to pass every test of modern historical writing and yet it was produced within a tradition outside the disciplinary grid of colonial education. Dr. Raziuddin Aquil in an article says that Itihasa-Purana, Vanshavalis, Charitas, Buranji, Bakhar and Tarikh might be replete with myths and legends and might not pass the test of veracity of historical truth or might not be strictly chronological, yet they present sufficiently large examples of historical consciousness and traditions in India. Just because they are different in style and language from modern western historical methods, they should not be dismissed as altogether ahistorical.

As far as the historical narrative in Eastern India is concerned, the common assumption about the first historical narrative of Bengal was that these were produced under the support of Fort William College in the first decade of the 19th century. However, whether these narratives had influences of Persian, Kumkum Chatterjee says that the “Rajabali” (1808) is a fascinating juxtaposition of multiple literary, historiographical and cultural traditions in a singular narrative. One of the most well-known literary works in Bengali of the early 18th century was the “AnnadaMangal” by Bharatchandra Ray, which describes the rise to fortune of Bhabananda Majumdar (founder of Nadia dynasty) by virtue of benevolence showered on him by goddess Annapurna. There are other historical narratives from the 18th century, one of them is the “Maharashtra Purana” written by Gangaram which describes the Maratha raids on Bengal. The text is in verse but describes in graphic and realistic details of Marathas raids on Bengal led by Bhaskar pant and the ultimate defeat of Maratha forces at the hands of Alivardi khan. It has been considered as an exceptional text in the 18th century Bengal. Ahmad Sharif in his work on the “History of Bengali literature” mentioned several other texts like “Pathan Prasamsa” and “Jowarshimha Prasasti” by Nawazish Khan, the famous author of “Gulebakavali”. Kumkum Chatterjee has pointed out that the Mangal-Kavyas can be located within a range of vernacular Puranas which had descended lineally from the Sanskrit Upa-Puranas. The performative aspects of the Mangal-kavyas associated them with the values and function of entertainment but at the same time they held the attention and interest of society by presenting tales of Heroes and Heroines. They also purported to be memories of bygone times. In the Instruction and advice mode the Mangal-kavyas presented models of ideal behavior via moral Heroes and Heroines.

Persian acquired the status as the language of high culture in the large parts of Islamic world. These narratives were called “Tarikhs” which provided connected accounts of reigns of successive kings and their government. Tarikh came to represent a pre-eminent type of historiographical narrative. Persian Tarikhs composed in 18th century Bengal showed sensitivity to the immediate political and cultural contexts in which they were produced. The authors of Bengal Tarikhs were mainly interested in writing about the developments in Bengal although all of them positioned Bengal as an integral part of the Mughal Empire. One of the important exceptions was Ghulam Hussain Salim, the author of “Riyaz-Us-Salatin”. He appended an overview of the reigns of Hindu kings who had ruled over Bengal prior to the conquest of the region by Bakhtiyar Khalji. However, almost all the Bengal tarikhs were composed during the period which was positioned between two political processes i.e., the decline of the nawabs and the accession of English companies as political power.

Genealogical literature constituted one of the most well-known and ubiquitous historical documents practically all over the world. Genealogies in Bengal were known as Kulagranthas, Kulajis or Kulapanjis. Here Kula means family or clan, the term Grantha means Book and Panji/Panjika means Chronicle, indicating that these materials were essentially genealogies of Kulas or lineages which recorded the generational or patrilineal Hindu family and clan over many centuries. The Kulagranthas also claimed to commemorate the story of developments which were believed to have shaped the social and normative structure of Hindu Brahmanical society in Bengal over hundreds of years. Kumkum Chatterjee says, the renewed interest in recovering old genealogies and editing and publicizing them became an integral aspect of caste politics. A group of scholars represented by R.C. Majumdar and others challenged the historicity of the Kulagranthas on the ground that they failed to meet rational-positivist standards. But another group of intellectuals including Dinesh Chandra Sen, Nagendranath Basu and others advanced their view that these genealogies had been regarded for centuries by people of Bengal as credible accounts of Brahmanical societies of these regions and therefore, they deserved to be recognized as history.

As far as South India is concerned, we could trace earliest forms of history from the writings of “Niti Literature”. Velcheru Narayana Rao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have talked about Niti literature and

pointed out that it was distinguished from the Dharmashastras and covers pragmatics, politics and statecraft. The emergence of a powerful dynasty of major rulers from the great center of Warangal and the conditions that existed for a general upward mobility among many communities in the Deccan apparently motivated many writers to produce such works in Telugu. Kings, ministers and people associated with power have also written many Niti books during this time. Rao and Subrahmanyam emphasizes the conceptual separation that already operated in these authors minds between Niti and Dharma. However, huge numbers of Niti literature were also produced during the reign of the Tuluva monarch Krishnadevaraya. In the later half of 17th century, Niti texts were no longer regarded as a matter concerning Kings and courtiers, rather it became for everyone and in particular anyone who desires social recognition and status. Niti began to be told in the form of stories rather than aphorisms and Shastrik statements. Janaki Nair draws our attention to the vernacular histories produced during 18th and 19th centuries in Mysore and tries to compare them with academic histories of Mysore written in 20th century. These vernacular histories were of various kinds. Some of them were directly written in colloquial Bhakhar traditions. Some were written in rhetorically rich and sophisticated Persian tradition and some of them written by rulers themselves as a personal memoir. Nair talks about the varied claims to historicity made by these texts. She also says that although colonial education was introduced in the 19th century, Kannada Histories continued to be produced on the genealogical model of Vamsavali and the Caritas. The historical writings in Mysore can be traced from the Wodeyar dynasty. These writings mainly flourished under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan. Tipu Sultan wrote "Haider Nama" and "Tarikh-I-Khodadadi" and Husain Ali Khan Kirmani wrote "Nishani-I-Haidari". These are undoubtedly important works which are considered as Historical and it recorded a large number of events from the origin of Haider Ali in Mysore as the ruler and till the death of his son Tipu Sultan at Seringapatam.

The Buranji manuscripts of history writing were distinctly a local tradition, unique to the region of Assam. It represents a significant body of written chronicles of ruling houses in the supposedly peripheral regions of Koch Bihar, Cachar, Sylhet, Manipur and Tripura. The Buranji chronicles began to be recorded from the 13th century in the Tai-Ahom language as the history of Ahom rulers who came from Yunnan and upper Burma. The word 'Buranji' is a "Tai-Ahom" word whose meaning is 'A store house of knowledge that enlightens the ignorant'. Early colonial administrations were skeptical about the early historical writings of Assam. They were of opinion that these narratives of Assam were very much blended with what is fabulous and uncertain. However, later the publication of Edward Gait's 'History of Assam' in the early 20th century indicates the beginning of a tradition of history writing in English in Assam. An important source of Gait's work was a set of Buranji's which according to Gait was of great value. He mentioned Buranjis belonging to 6th century but he pointed out that only those dating from the early 13th century could be considered as trustworthy. However, Gait transformed the pre-colonial Buranji's into trusted and reliable historical documents, on the basis which any European historian could work. The intellectual transformation of the Buranji from a dormant chronicle to an authoritative text that spoke for the nation took concrete shape with the establishment of the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) in 1928.

Prachi Deshpande in her book "Creative Pasts" has stated that regional politicians have routinely employed Maratha historiographical metaphors in political rhetoric. She further argues that vernacular history is often used as a weapon in the political struggle for identity based on religion, caste, region and language. In such contestations we could find the distinctions between professional academic history and popular vernacular histories. However, unverifiable social memories are often preferred over verifiable historical evidences and facts and history is misused or sacrificed in the quest for power. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has rightly pointed out that historians of professional kind are less exposed to the pressures of the pasts that are invented, claimed and contested in popular domain. While talking about Maratha history Prachi Deshpande has discussed about how the category of

Memory has emerged as a prominent framework to examine cultural practices through which groups represent the past. According to her, memory and history, orality and literacy have appeared as homologous binaries placed along a linear unfolding path from tradition to modernity. She also talks about the pre-colonial Maratha historiographical practices. Bakhar is a prose historical narrative widely produced in the 18th century Maharashtra. These were actually narrative accounts of families, events or prominent figures' lives and they described the causes and outcomes of important recent events. These texts recognized the discreteness of the past and its root. They placed events in sequence and explained how and why they occurred through a literary recreation of the past. According to her, the earliest Marathi Bakhar was probably composed in the 16th century but the bulk of them were composed from the late 17th century onwards, reaching their peak in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, numbering about two hundred. These narratives were composed as biographies of great rulers, genealogies of prominent families or accounts of momentous battles and events chronologically. Most of the Bakhars comment freely on the characteristics of different sub-continental groups and often display very clear affinities of loyalty to particular rulers and chieftains. Sir Jadunath Sarkar considered the Bakhars as "collections of gossip and traditions" mostly better than opium eater's tales. While Sumit Guha argues that Bakhars were intended and emerged as local factual narratives and the past they invoked was authenticated with the facts already established within the common knowledge of local communities.

Deshpande elaborates about "Bhausahabanchi Bakhar", written a few decades after the battle of Panipat. It analyses the massive Maratha debacle against the Afghan forces of Ahmad Shah Abdali. "Sabhashad Bakhar" is the narrative of Shivaji's action where the author is continuously talking about the impatience and fear of Aurangzeb and also points out new Maratha state's threat to the Mughal power. Deshpande says that the Bakhar brings together both the narrative frame of Akhyayika and the reportage of the Akbharat which must be seen in their totality as an exercise in history. In many ways, says Deshpande, the Bakhar form exemplifies the Marathi Deccan's position as a "Bridge region" between north and south and the narratives reveal awareness of contemporary history and narrative practices in other parts of the sub-continent. However, representations of the Maratha past gradually developed an explicitly Hindu nationalist slant that identified Muslims as equally foreign to Indian society as the British. They continue to fuel a muscular Hindu chauvinism in Maharashtra and other regions of India today.

Allison Busch, in the article "Literary Responses to the Mughal Imperium" traces the advent of Mughal political order to the princely state of Orcha (Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh) through the eyes of Kesavdas who wrote in "Brajbhasha Riti tradition". He made a significant break with tradition by eschewing Sanskrit in favor of the humble Hindi dialect of Brajbhasha. During his lifetime, Orcha was subsumed into Mughal Empire and this political repositioning was reflected in his three major works i.e., Ratna Bhavani, Virsimhdevcarit and Jahangirias-Chandrika. Though Riti tradition is often dismissed by modern Hindi critics, however, this triad of historical poems by Kesavdas is a fascinating literary response of a particular regional kingdom as Mughal authority became increasingly entrenched.

Among the most important primary sources for study of the social and cultural history of medieval Rajasthan are the Traditions, Clan histories and Genealogies of the Rajputs. These prose sources known in Rajasthan as Bat, Khyat, Vigat, Pidhiavali and Vansavali are written predominantly in Dingle bhasa or western Rajasthani. They represent a segment of a wider body of Rajasthani literature in both prose and poetry which has its base in oral traditions and which was preserved and transmitted in Rajasthan by Caran, Bhat, Rao, Motisar and other specialized castes. The Bat (vat) or 'tale' is a specialized form of Dingle prose narrative. It is essentially an 'Inspirational biographical' narrative which deals either with the life history of an important individual, such as the leader of a particular Rajput clan (Kul) or with particular episodes in his life, which are seen to be significant. The recitation

of Batam was traditionally the domain of learned specialists of the caste of Maru Carans, who maintained hereditary attachments to particular Rajput families. Although there were no special occasions set aside specifically for the recitation of tales, recitations did take place frequently at homes of Rajputs before their families. The recitation of such tales generally began with a poem (Dohagit), praising the characters of the tale, stating a moral or making an observation about the cultural or geographical peculiarities of the area with which the characters were concerned. A small number of Carans made this recitation art a full-time profession and maintained hereditary associations with particular Rajput families, whose histories and traditions they were responsible for preserving. A few of the most prestigious carans were also accepted in the royal darbars, attaining the rank of Kaviraja or 'Court-laureate' and assuming positions of great influence because of the power of their words. Such caranas were generally given the honorary title of Barhat (Guardian of the Gate) and also some were rewarded with land grants. These carans were also responsible for the composition of poems and official histories of the royal line and of prominent cadet branches. The value of these sources for the study of Rajasthani social and cultural history has been much questioned. Indian scholars such as G.H. Ojha, N.S. Bhati, A. Nanta and others view them with great skepticism and all generally consider the Khyat materials of little real use for the writing of pure history. Scholars like V.S. Bhargava see importance in their genealogical content and life-like description of events.

As Partha Chatterjee says that these vernacular histories are all marked by their difference from the authorized practices of modern academic history and vernacular historians have been and continued to act as vehicles for a range of critiques of modern academic history. Dr. Raziuddin Aquil has rightly pointed out that the limitation of vernacular histories is that they are often used as a weapon in the political struggle for identity based on religion, caste, region and languages. In such, contestations, professional historical research is often set aside and traditional notions and beliefs are privileged by custodians of popular sentiments. Thus, they often display their prejudices in the open. But still, in the end, we can say that effective histories are being made in the vernacular and this kind of effective historical work was very much prevalent in pre-colonial India.

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