
UNIT 7 HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITIONS IN EARLY INDIA

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7.1 INTRODUCTION

It might seem rather trite to say that history is a study of the past, but, for understanding ancient traditions of historiography, it is perhaps useful to remember that definitions of history have been changing over time.

Today, our understanding of the scope of history has expanded considerably. We no longer understand history to be simply a chronicle of kings. Instead, historians are interested in, explore, and attempt to reconstruct histories of the environment, of gender relations, of social categories and classes that were regarded as marginal, subordinate or even insignificant, of processes, and of regions that were considered peripheral. Many of these concerns find little or no place in ancient works that we identify as historical. What then was the focus of these works?

As we will see, many of these works were composed by literate men, generally (though not always) brahmanas, for consumption by the ruling elite. They were designed to proclaim and legitimize claims to power by new aspirants (who might otherwise have been dismissed as upstarts or interlopers). They were also deployed to consolidate claims of more established rulers. Thus the concerns of both authors and patrons seem rather narrow. Vast sections of the population, including common women and men, find little or no place within such narratives.

It may seem easy, and even fashionable to dismiss these works on account of their limitations. Yet, it is worth remembering that their significance has been debated for nearly two centuries, and that a critical appreciation of the traditions within which these texts were located can enrich our understanding of the past.

Initially, these texts were opened up for scrutiny using modern techniques of analysis in the colonial context. Works that purported to be *itihisas* (literally ‘so it was’) and *puranas* (‘old’) were compared with histories produced in ancient Greece and Rome, and were found wanting. They were found to be especially deficient in terms of spatial

and chronological precision, which was regarded as the minimum requirement of a historical work. And this was then used to argue, implicitly and often explicitly, that, as they lacked a sense of history, early Indians and by extension their descendants were intellectually inferior to their western counterparts. Clearly, history and notions of the past were inextricably enmeshed in notions of power.

As may be expected, attempts to suggest that Indians were somehow incapable of writing histories led to a reaction, where virtually any and every textual tradition which had some semblance of chronological underpinnings, was valorised as embodying historical “fact.” These responses have in turn been critically examined and questioned. It is useful to keep these perspectives and contexts in mind as we examine specific examples of early texts and traditions that have historiographical significance.

7.2 EARLIEST ‘HISTORIES’: THE VEDIC *DANASTUTIS*

If we understand histories as recording events that were regarded as significant by those who chronicled them, some of the earliest examples of these come from the *Rgveda* (c. 2nd millennium BCE). These include verses that were identified as *danastutis* (literally ‘in praise of gifts’). These were composed by the recipients, who were priests, and usually mention the name of the donor. Here is a typical example. These verses are from the second hymn of the eighth mandala or book of the *Rgveda*:

Skilled is Yadu’s son in giving precious wealth, he who is rich in herds of cattle.

May he, Asanga’s son, Svanadratha, obtain all joy and happiness.

Asanga, the son of Playoga, has surpassed others, by giving ten thousand.

I have got ten bright coloured oxen....

As we can see from this example, the recipient acknowledges the gifts he receives and prays for the well-being of the donor. Such acknowledgments or proclamations were a part of major rituals such as the *asvamedha* as well. As part of the ritual, the sacrificial horse was let loose to wander for a year. During that period, a brahmana priest was expected to sing about the generosity of the patron every morning, while a ksatriya was to sing about his war-like exploits every evening. It is likely that many of the stories that were later compiled in the epics and the Puranas developed out of such narrative practices.

It is perhaps worth reflecting on what would get recorded and why. Only what was regarded as positive or desirable from the point of view of the brahmana or the ksatriya would find a place in such eulogies. Other activities, or failures, would tend to be glossed over or even obliterated from memory. We may also note that recalling the generosity and prowess of the patron was not meant to be a simple, objective recounting, but was in fact meant to ensure that the patron would continue to live up to expectations. As such, these histories were related to a context of patronage.

7.3 ARE THE EPICS HISTORICAL NARRATIVES?

Traditionally, the *Mahabharata* is recognised as an *itihasa* while the *Ramayana* is regarded as a *mahakavya* (great poem). Each of these texts has a long and complicated history. The kernel of the stories contained in the epics may date back to the early centuries of the 1st millennium BCE, but the texts were finally written down much later (c. 4th-5th centuries CE). As such, the texts have undergone alterations and additions

over several centuries. The Kurus and Pancalas in general are mentioned in later Vedic literature (c. first half of the 1st millennium BCE). While both these lineages were important in the *Mahabharata*, references to specific personages mentioned in the epic are relatively sparse in the Vedic corpus. References to the locale of the *Ramayana*, Kosala and Videha, are even fewer, and, once again, the principal characters of the epic hardly figure in later Vedic literature. Archaeological excavations and explorations indicate that sites such as Hastinapura and Indraprastha (associated with the *Mahabharata*) and Ayodhya (associated with the *Ramayana*) were small, pre-urban settlements during this period.

The literal historicity of the events depicted in the epics is unlikely to be established. Nevertheless, the texts can and have been analysed in terms of the genre that they represent. Significantly, both epics contain genealogies. The *Mahabharata* contains the genealogies of the lunar (*chandravamsa*) lineage, while the *Ramayana* contains the genealogy of the solar (*suryavamsa*) lineage. Several ruling families in the early medieval period (c. 7th century CE) traced descent from these lineages. While the genealogies may not be literally true, they are important for what they suggest about socio-political processes.

7.4 PURANIC GENEALOGIES AND WHAT THEY TELL US

By the middle of the 1st millennium CE, another category of literature, the Puranas, was written down. Like the epics, the antecedents of the Puranas can be traced back for several centuries. And as in the case of the *Mahabharata*, a social group known as the *sutas* evidently played an important role in the composition, compilation and transmission of at least some of the narratives that were included in the Puranas. The *sutas* are often regarded as bards. They were important in early states, so much so that they are listed amongst the “jewels” or principal supporters of the raja in the later Vedic texts. They were expected to act as messengers of the king, accompany him in battle, and maintain as well as narrate stories about his exploits. However, *sutas* are also mentioned as low status people in the Dharmasastras such as the *Manusmṛti*. This would suggest that at least some people in society, perhaps the brahmanas, were contesting the claims of the *sutas* to be both close to the king and transmitters of royal lore. And when the epics and Puranas were finally written down, the authors were recognised as brahmanas rather than as *sutas*.

We find two or three types of genealogies in the Puranas. The first includes lineages of sages. Such lineages, which perhaps served as markers of legitimate transmission of knowledge, are found in some of the Upanisads and Dharmasastras as well. The other genealogies are those of rulers. These in turn are divided into two categories, those that pre-date the onset of the *Kaliyuga* and those of rulers who are post- *Kaliyuga*. The first category, delineating the original solar and lunar lineages, includes the heroes of the epics. In fact, the war that constitutes the central event of the *Mahabharata* is recognised as marking the turning point (for the worse) in human history, and the beginning of an age of decline, i.e. the *Kaliyuga*. The genealogy of the second category of rulers, clearly lesser mortals, is marked by an interesting feature. All these genealogies, which in some cases run till about the 5th century CE, are constructed in the future tense. For instance, a verse about the Gupta rulers, who ruled in north India from c. 4th century CE, runs as follows:

Kings born of the Gupta family will enjoy all these territories: viz. Prayaga (Allahabad) on the Ganga, Saketa (eastern Uttar Pradesh) and Magadha.

Why were these genealogies compiled, and why did they take such a curious form? There are no easy answers. It is likely that the final compilation was undertaken during the time of the Gupta rulers, as (with few exceptions) later rulers are generally not mentioned. Was the future tense adopted so as to suggest that these rulers were destined to rule, and was this then a possible strategy for legitimation? It is likely that this would have also created an illusion of stability and permanence that may have been valuable in a fluid political situation. What is interesting is that many (though not all) of the rulers mentioned in the Puranic genealogies are known from other sources such as inscriptions and coins as well. At the same time, not all rulers who are known from other sources find place in these genealogies. Clearly, traditions of recording the names of rulers as well as the duration of their reigns were widely prevalent, and were more or less systematised within the Puranic tradition.

It has been suggested that genealogies become particularly important during certain historical moments, when attempts are made to either contest or consolidate power. Invoking genealogies at such moments may become a means of asserting status, which may be especially important when these claims are somewhat tenuous. Claims to continuity, implicit in invoking lineage identities, are also particularly significant when there are major resources that are accumulated and handed down from one generation to the next. These resources could include land, and in the ultimate analysis, kingdoms.

What is also important is to focus on the principles of inclusion and exclusion that underlie genealogies. We can examine whether kinship is traced bilaterally (i.e. through both parents) or is patrilineal or (in some rare instances) matrilineal. We can also examine the positions assigned to elder and younger brothers in these texts. Thus the genealogies often provide information about the kind of kinship networks that were valorised.

What is evident then is that such genealogies need not be literally true. Nevertheless, insofar as they appeal to selected events and ancestors in the past, they allow us to speculate on the circumstances in which such strategies of drawing on or even constructing a mythical past may have been important.

7.5 COURTLY TRADITIONS : *PRASASTIS*

Much of the literature we have been considering so far was written in relatively simple Sanskrit verse. Although access to Sanskrit learning was limited, the Puranas and the epics contain provisions that suggest that these could and probably were read out to all categories of people, including women and *sudras*, who were otherwise denied access to Sanskrit texts. In other words, there were certain kinds of ‘histories’ that were meant to be accessible to all sections of society. These were not only meant to provide an understanding about the past, but were also probably visualised as a means of disseminating information about social norms. In a sense, these agendas were complementary.

There were at the same time, other categories of texts that were probably meant for circulation amongst a more restricted, elite audience. These were associated with the royal court, and were usually written in ornate Sanskrit, with prolific use of similes, metaphors, and other strategies to render the text weighty. Examples of these texts are found in *prasastis* or eulogistic inscriptions as well as in *caritas*. While some of the earliest examples of *prasastis* are in Prakrit, the best-known examples are in Sanskrit. Such inscriptions become particularly common from c. 4th century CE. These were often independent inscriptions, but could also be part of votive inscriptions, commemorating the generosity of the royal donor.

Perhaps amongst the best-known of such *prasastis* is Samudragupta's **Prayaga prasasti**, also known as the Allahabad Pillar Inscription (it is inscribed on an Asokan pillar). It was composed by Harisena, who evidently was a skilled poet, apart from holding several offices. The inscription describes how the ruler was chosen by his father, his numerous exploits, and the strategies whereby he won the allegiance of rulers of distant lands, his heroic qualities and his boundless scholarship. In short, the ruler is idealized as an all-rounder, someone who excelled in just about everything. It is likely that some of the descriptions of the ruler's exploits are true. Nonetheless, the element of poetic exaggeration is also more than apparent. To cite just one example: the ruler's body was described as having become even more handsome as it was adorned with the wounds caused by axes, arrows, spikes, spears, darts, swords, clubs, javelins and other weapons. Such elaborate descriptions, couched in ornate Sanskrit, were probably meant to impress the ruling elite. While the inscription was literally visible, its contents would probably have been accessible only to a relatively limited audience.

Another famous *prasasti* is that of Pulakesin II, the Calukya ruler of the 7th century CE. The poet who composed this particular *prasasti*, Ravikirti, compared his skills to those of Kalidasa and Bharavi. Once again, we have a description of Pulakesin's accession to the throne, and his military exploits, which included pushing back the contemporary ruler of north India, Harsa, when he attempted to cross the Vindhya. Ravikirti's composition is part of a votive inscription that also records how the poet donated a house for a Jaina teacher.

7.6 COURTLY TRADITIONS : *CHARITAS*

Another genre of text associated primarily with the courts was the *charita*. These were meant to be accounts of the lives and achievements of 'great men.' Most of the surviving examples of *charitas* are in Sanskrit, and, like the *prasastis*, the style of these compositions is extremely ornate. Given the length of these texts, it seems likely that these were composed entirely for elite consumption. Somewhat paradoxically, one of the earliest *charitas* that survive is the *Buddhacharita*, composed by Asvaghosa (c. 1st century CE). Although purporting to be the life of a world renouncer, the author dwells at length on the luxuries of courtly life, including elaborate descriptions of women. It is possible that this was meant to serve as a representation of life at the Kusana court. Perhaps the best-known of the *charita* genre is the *Harsacharita*, composed by Banabhatta. This is an account of the early years of Harsa's reign. Bana's composition contains some of the most complex prose sentences in Sanskrit literature, carefully crafted so as to lend an aura of exclusiveness to the ruler who was eulogized. The description of Harsa's feet, cited below, is just one example of this style:

His feet were very red as if with wrath at insubordinate kings, and they shed a bright ruby light on the crowded crests of the prostrate monarchs, and caused a sunset of all the fierce luminaries of war and poured streams of honey from the flowers of the crest garlands of the local kings, and were never even for a moment unattended, as by the heads of slain enemies, by swarms of bees which fluttered bewildered by the sweet odour of the chaplets on the heads of all the feudal chiefs.

The writers of *charitas* adopted other strategies as well. We find that Sandhyakaranandin, a poet who eulogized the Pala ruler Rama Pala of eastern India (c. 11-12th centuries CE), composed the *Ramacharita* in such a way that each verse could be interpreted as referring either to the life of the epic hero or to that of his patron.

It is likely that both *prasastis* and *charitas* were especially valuable in situations where rulers were somewhat insecure. In the case of all the four rulers we have mentioned, it is evident that their claims to the throne did not rest on primogeniture. In Samudragupta's case Harisena states that he was chosen by his father, ignoring the claims of rivals. Pulakesin was the nephew of his predecessor. Harsa succeeded to the throne on the sudden death of his elder brother, and claimed the kingdom of his deceased brother-in-law as well. Rama Pala, too, had no direct claim to the throne. It is possible that these elaborate texts were to some extent visualized as strategies for exalting rulers who might otherwise have been vulnerable.

7.7 A POET/HISTORIAN : KALHANA AND THE RAJTARANGINI

It is often said that the only truly historical work produced in ancient India was the *Rajatarangini*, or the river of kings, authored by Kalhana, (12th century CE). The *Rajatarangini* is, at one level, a history of Kashmir since its inception (the account begins with the creation of the land from primeval waters). It consists of eight books or *tarangas*, and is composed in verse.

The first three *tarangas* deal with the history of the region till the 7th century CE, *tarangas* 4 to 6 carry the story forward till the 11th century, while the last two *tarangas* (which are also the longest) deal with the 12th century. What is interesting is to see how the tone of the narrative changes: in the first section, the author, who was a brahmana, the son of a minister, and a learned Sanskrit scholar, paints a picture of what, from his point of view, was an ideal world, one in which sons succeeded fathers, and in which the brahmanical norms of varna and gender hierarchies were strictly followed. However, in the next two sections, he documents in detail how these norms were violated. Amongst the “horrors” according to Kalhana is the phenomenon of women rulers. As is obvious, not all present-day readers will share Kalhana's perspective, even as they might derive information from his writing.

What makes Kalhana's work unique is that he mentions at the outset the sources he consulted. These included *sasanas* or royal proclamations pertaining to religious endowments, *prasastis* or eulogies, and the *sastras*:

By the inspection of ordinances of former kings relating to religious foundations and grants, laudatory inscriptions, as well as written records, all wearisome error has been set at rest.

He also attempts to distinguish between the plausible and the fantastic, and offers explanations for changes in fortune. These are, more often than not, in terms of invoking fate, whose ways, according to the author, were mysterious.

Kalhana is scathing in his critique of earlier writers, whose works, according to him, were full of errors and lacked style. Unfortunately, none of the works of his predecessors have survived, so we have no means of assessing his claims. He himself set a precedent that was emulated by later writers, who continued his narrative down to the times of the sultans of Kashmir.

Kalhana regarded himself as a poet. Ideally, according to him, a poet was supposed to be endowed with divine insight, (*divyadrsti*), and was almost as powerful as Prajapati, the god recognised as the creator within the brahmanical tradition. He also envisaged his work as a didactic text, meant especially for the education of kings. There is an emphasis on trying to offer impartial judgments, and to cultivate a sense of detachment. As a poet, moreover, Kalhana functioned within the Sanskrit tradition according to

which every composition was expected to have a dominant *rasa* (emotion, mood or sentiment). The *rasa* he valorised was the *santa rasa* (tranquility), although there are sections where the heroic tone dominates. There are also sections where the horrors of war and the destruction it leaves in its trail are graphically highlighted. Interestingly, although Kalhana was clearly close to the court, he was not the court poet.

7.8 OTHER TRADITIONS OF HISTORICAL WRITING

While most traditions of historical writing were related to kings, other traditions developed around religious institutions. These included the Buddhist, Jaina, and brahmanical institutions. Of these, the early Buddhist tradition is perhaps the best-known at present.

Buddhist traditions record the convening of three (according to some versions four) Buddhist councils, where early Buddhist doctrines and teachings were recorded. Gradually, as the monastic order was consolidated, more systematic records were kept, and a system of chronology, marking years in terms of the *mahaparinirvana* or the death of the Buddha, was evolved. Maintaining such records probably became more important as monasteries became rich institutions, receiving endowments of villages, lands, and other goods, as well as cash, from benefactors including kings. Such chronicles were best preserved in Sri Lanka, where there was a close bonding between the state and the monasteries. This relationship was documented in texts such as the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*.

7.9 DATING SYSTEMS

Chronologies are crucial to history, and it is in this context that it is worth examining the varieties of dating systems that were used in early India. One of the earliest systems to be documented, and one that remained popular for several centuries, was the use of regnal years. This was a system whereby kings took the first year when they began ruling as a starting point, counting years of their rule in terms of this beginning. This was used by the Mauryan emperor Asoka, for instance. He used dates derived from the time of his *abhiseka* (sprinkling with sacred water). We learn from his thirteenth major rock edict that he attacked Kalinga eight years after he had been installed as king.

In other instances, dynastic eras were developed. Perhaps the best-known example of this is provided by the era of the Guptas. This was projected as beginning from c. 320 CE, the date assigned to the first important Gupta ruler, Chandragupta I. Interestingly, the use of the era began with retrospective effect, from the time of Chandragupta II, about 80 years after the date from which it was supposed to begin. Clearly, it was only after they had consolidated their power that the Gupta rulers thought it fit to begin an era, pushing back the antiquity of their claims to power as far back as possible.

Other eras that have endured for about two millennia are the Vikrama era (c. 58 BCE) and the Saka era (c. 78 CE). Both of these eras were probably of royal origin, but there is little or no consensus regarding who the kings in question were. The Vikrama era is particularly problematic from this point of view, as several kings in early India adopted the title of *vikramaditya* (literally the sun of valour), and we have no means of determining which one amongst these initiated the era which is still in use. The Saka era may mark the beginning of the reign of Kaniska, arguably the most illustrious of the Kusana rulers. However, it is worth remembering that the Kusanas and Sakas were different groups of Central Asian peoples. What is possible is that the term Saka was used as a generic term for foreigners, and an era that may have been begun by the Kusanas came to be known by this name.

7.10 SUMMARY

It is evident then that a sense of history, if by this we mean an awareness of the past, was well-developed in early India. There were several systems of reckoning dates that were in existence, and that were commonly used, as is evident from finds of inscriptions bearing dates. These have been found throughout the subcontinent. Inscriptions and in textual traditions tell us about how elites thought about the past and attempted to both use and manipulate it through specific strategies of recording. These include recording the names and deeds of generous patrons, as for instance in the Vedic *danastutis*. Genealogies, too, could be constructed to meet political exigencies, and could be extended in innovative ways. Besides, distinctive genres were developed to proclaim the status of rulers, most evident in the *prasastis* and the *charitas*. Yet, there seem to have been other traditions as well. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, though for and about kings, is very different in its tone and tenor.

It is when we search for histories of non-elite groups that we run into problems. These were clearly of marginal interest to the literate few, who compiled the textual traditions we have examined. So we are left with the sense of historiographical traditions that were rich, but restricted.

7.11 EXERCISES

- 1) Write notes on the following :
 - a) Vedic *Danastutis*
 - b) *Charitas*
 - c) *Prasastis*
- 2) Discuss the tradition of Puranic genealogies.
- 3) Who was Kalhana? Discuss his historical work.
- 4) Write a note on the dating systems used by various dynasties in early India.

7.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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