UNIT 2  **MYTHS, DANA-STUTI, GATHA, AKHYANA AND THE TRANSITION TO EPIC AND ITIHASA-PURANA TRADITION***

---

**Structure**

2.0 Objectives  
2.1 Introduction  
2.2 *Itihasa-Purana* Tradition  
2.3 Embedded History: *Dana-Stuti* Hymns, *Narasamsis* and *Akhyanas*  
  2.3.1 *Dana-Stuti* Hymns  
  2.3.2 *Gatha* and *Narasamsi*  
  2.3.3 *Raibhis*  
  2.3.4 *Akhyanas*  
2.4 The Epics  
  2.4.1 The *Mahabharata*  
  2.4.2 The *Ramayana*  
2.5 The *Puranas*  
2.6 Summary  
2.7 Keywords  
2.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises  
2.9 Suggested Readings  
2.10 Instructional Video Recommendations

---

**2.0 OBJECTIVES**

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand embedded history tradition,  
- identify forms of embedded histories, particularly *dana-stuti*, *gathas*, *akhyanas*, etc.,  
- underline the importance of epic tradition, with emphasis on *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and  
- comprehend the final transition of *itihasa-Purana* tradition in the form of *Puranas*.

---

**2.1 INTRODUCTION**

India may not have had what are generally termed as established genres of history, but it had many texts which reflect a consciousness of history. In this Unit, we will be looking at some of the earliest literature of the Indian subcontinent and find out how it can not only be used to reconstruct the past but also affords Indian civilisation with a sense of the past. The most ancient literature of India are the *Vedas* – *Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva Veda*. Besides these the *Sutra* literature and the *Puranas*.

---

* Dr. Suchi Dayal, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi
have also proved to be relevant in trying to ascertain a consciousness of the past that ancient Indians had. The way past is recorded or the presence of historical writings affords insights into the nature of early Indian society. But what is historical consciousness? Any society which shows a sense of history, a consciousness of both past and present points to having historical consciousness. Such societies record past events. Some societies may never record past events or maintain a historical tradition. However such a-historical societies do not lack a sense of history altogether. It may simply mean that these societies developed some perceptions of historical consciousness in ways that are different from literate societies. Societies are known to have represented the past in different ways. Ancient India was a case in point.

So let us begin by tracing the presence of historical consciousness from the beginning when the ancient texts were being composed for the first time.

### 2.2 ITIHASA-PURANA TRADITION

A significant feature of the Indian historical tradition was its association with the *itihasa-purana* tradition. This term is related to the traditions relating to the past. *Itihasa* literally means ‘thus indeed it was’. *Purana* means that which is old and includes events and stories that are believed to be of ancient times. The *Atharva Veda* and *Shatapatha Brahmana* refer to *itihasa* and *purana*. The conjoint term meaning that which was believed to have happened in the past is mentioned in the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanishads*. By the first millennium CE this term was applied to sectarian texts (*Puranas*) containing myths and rituals centred on a deity. This body of knowledge came to be ascribed with the status of the fifth *Veda*, perhaps, to provide it with divine sanction. However there was no attempt to claim that it was a divine revelation.

Two things categorised the historical consciousness that was found in early texts:

1) It was of an embedded form. Since it was situated within the larger structure of the texts, it needed to be prised open. Examples include origin myths, *dana stuti* hymns, and genealogies of ancient descent groups.

2) They recurred in primarily ritual texts. The purpose behind their being embedded in ritual texts was to provide sanctity to them and ensure continuity.

When these embedded forms embodied social assumptions and prescribed conduct for the present, these could be understood as recollections of the past. Subsequently the embedded forms were freed from ritual contexts. Moving towards a more externalised history, they took the following forms: *caritas*, *prasastis*, *vamsavalis* and inscriptions. There was a clear change from believed history to a clearly more defined history.

### 2.3 EMBEDDED HISTORY: DANA-STUTI HYMNS, NARASAMSIS AND AKHYANAS

In order to understand the embedded forms of history we have to begin with the *Vedas*. It is when the *itihasa-purana* tradition commences. The Vedic texts were a collection of hymns, compositions describing and explaining rituals, commentaries and do not purport to reflect a large range of social concerns. There are four *Vedas*: *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Atharva Veda* and *Yajur Veda*. The *Rig Veda* is the oldest. The time period during which the *Rig Veda* is supposed to have been composed is
Myths, Dana-Stuti, Gatha, Akhyana and the Transition to Epic and Itihasa-Purana Tradition

from 1500 BCE to 1000 BCE. It has 10 mandalas or books. Some sections of the Rig Veda are older and some are later. For example, books I, VIII, IX and X are later than books II-VII. Sama, Yajur and Atharva Veda along with the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads (1000-500 BCE) constitute Later Vedic literature.

The Vedic literature reflects a clan society which was transforming itself from a relatively egalitarian system of the Rig Veda to a more hierarchical structure of the Later Vedic period. The Rig Vedic society was cattle herding, agro-pastoral in nature which was located in the north-west of the subcontinent. This was the land between the river Indus and river Saraswati. Gradually there was a movement towards the east and the Vedic people settled in the Ganga-Yamuna doab. The society became more agricultural, superseding pastoralism. The Rig Vedic chief who was the protector of his tribe till now, emerged as a raja by the Later Vedic period. He was someone who was bestowed with a special status via a series of sacrificial rituals such as abhisheka, rajasuya, ashvamedha, vajapeya etc. Gradually, there was a move on the part of the brahmanas to associate the raja with god Prajapati, and accord him with divine status. In return the brahmanas, who were the ritual specialists, received gifts from the Kshatriyas (the warrior chiefs). Thus the kshatriya’s position as the raja of the tribe was legitimised and he was promised with the possibility of a place in heaven, and blessed with power, strength, territory and control over labour.

Bonds of reciprocity brought the yajamana, the initiator of the sacrifice, and the priest or a number of priests who conducted the sacrificial ritual, close. As mentioned earlier, the raja was the recipient of status, legitimacy, power and strength and the priest was given dana (gifts) or dakshina (sacrificial fees). Those who bestowed the largest gifts were eulogised as the best of the warriors. Kings who performed sacrificial rituals in earlier texts were upheld as exemplars in the later texts thereby providing a glimpse of a looking back to the past. It was in the dana-stuti hymns, gathas and narasamsis, which were poems in praise of heroes, that such military exploits and the eulogies formed a part.

2.3.1 Dana-Stuti Hymns

The dana-stuti hymns are scattered through the various books of the Rig Veda. The eighth mandala (book) of the Rig Veda consists of the largest number of these hymns. They are associated with the family of Kanvas brahmanas. The Kanvas were linked in later texts to Angirasas who together with the Bhrgus were keepers of the narratives relating to past events. We find such royal eulogies about the extravagant munificence of chiefs being inserted within the ritual and religious hymns of the Rig Veda. Subsequently gathas and narasamsis and akhyanas make their appearance.

According to Romila Thapar, the eulogising of the acts of gift-giving can be understood as the record of what was assumed to have happened. The priest recited the past and current exploits of the chief together with the gifts which he received. The heroic exploits were victories over rival clans and chiefs or conflicts between those described as aryas and dasas. The hymns composed by the priests in praise of the king’s generosity legitimised the latter’s status. The purpose was to remember those acts of the raja which when recalled at a later date would ensure for the priests an equal of not a larger share of gifts. Why was this material embedded in ritual texts? Thapar believes that such embedding granted longevity to the act. Their function was to obtain sanction from the past for the present. The rajas were
linked with the earlier ones thereby legitimising their status. Gradually *dakshina* (sacrificial fees) came to personify the nexus of patronage that existed between the raja and the priest. The priest could be awarded with wealth constituting of ‘cattle, horses, camels, chariots, wagons, garments, treasure chests, gold, *dasis* etc’. Later, the rajas of earlier times continued to be remembered with invocation to their greatness. For instance, the *rajasuya* sacrifice was preceded by the reciting of the list of earlier consecrated rajas, some of who were *yajamana* in sacrifices. Still later in the *Brahmana* texts, the earlier rajas continued to be invoked, even though the language and rituals might have undergone change.

### 2.3.2 Gatha and Narasamsi

The *gatha* and *narasamsi* which emerge for the first time in the *Rig Veda* continued as a floating mass of literature which point to the existence of literary genres of historical nature. Both *gathas* and *narasamsis* were not regarded as revealed wisdom and were supposed to have been composed by mere human beings. They were considered separate from religious songs. According to Pathak, ‘…the references in the *Rig Veda* itself to royal eulogies, *gathas* and *narasamsis* strongly suggest the existence of an oral tradition of historical compositions which sometimes influenced the fixed and written religious tradition’ (Pathak 1966).

This brief historical survey was undertaken in order to establish the relevance of embedded history which according to Romila Thapar ‘is often found in lineage-based societies’. Embedded history according to her may not be history proper but it does reveal a perception of the past which proves the existence of historical consciousness.

### 2.3.3 Raibhis

The *raibhis* (religious songs), *gathas* and *narasamsis* were similar to *dana-stuti* hymns. The *gathas* were added later to the *Vedas*. Originally the word *gatha* simply meant a song. Later it was regarded in the genre of literary composition. The composers of the *gathas* were brahmanas particularly Kanva brahmanas. In the *dana-stuti* hymns the purpose was to praise heroic exploits. Now, in the *gathas*, the raja is praised for performing a sacrifice (eg. *asvamedha*) and giving a generous *dakshina* to the priest regardless of whatever heroic exploits he may have performed. Here too, the precedents were emphasised. Some of the sacrificial rituals extended for days together and the recitation of the narratives implicitly made a mention of the reward for the poet. Now what is noteworthy is that the *gathas* extolled the acquiring of a high status by the patron who for example may have been a sudra, who now was being accepted into *brahmanahood*.

In the Later corpus, particularly in the commentaries on the rituals (*Sutra* texts), the heroes were given the status of *pitr* (ancestors). This was because they belonged to the past. As early as the Vedic age, *narasamsi* had developed multiple meanings. It meant ‘the praise of men’ or simple ‘the praises composed by men’. A set of ten *narasamsis* (hero-lauds) were recited at a particular point in the ritual. Majority of these emphasised not so much the heroic acts but the acquisition of high status for example a sudra’s son successfully claiming *brahmanahood* or Sunahsepa’s induction into the clan of high status Visvamitra. Some of them were mentioned in the *Rig Veda* but are now being backed by narratives to provide precedents and ‘refresh memories’. The significance of acquiring of status through elaborate means is reflected in later texts. The *narasamsis* were incorporated into larger sacrificial rituals. These were associated with references to rajas, their settlements, his affiliation with
jana, the priest and the locale of the sacrifice. For example when Satanika Satrajita performed the asvamedha sacrifice, there is a reference to the horse being taken from the raja of Chedi. Thus earlier performances of the ritual were remembered. All the above mentioned genres referred to past personalities and events. The act of mentioning these was aimed at their being remembered in posterity. During the performance of the rajasuya sacrifice, mention is made of the important brahmanas who had conducted sacrifices for the important rajas in the past. Similarly, prior to the asvamedha sacrifice all those rajas who had been consecrated and had performed the asvamedha in the past were invoked. Thus ‘an attempt was being made, first to endow such names and their narratives with some claim to historicity; second, ensure their preservation by ensconcing them within rituals; and third, through reciting the narrative as part of the ritual, deliberately connecting a believed past to the present’ (Thapar 2013: 126-27). In this context the rituals were propagated to ensure the livelihood, status and authority of the priests, and the historical tradition, never mind how fragmentary it was, was brought into service.

2.3.4 Akhyanas

The akhyanas commemorated rajas and heroes. These were stories or narratives which were recited during sacrificial rituals. They were probably in existence during the Rig Vedic period. Though they were similar to narasamsis, their meaning differed in connotation. They as part of the ritual focussed on issues of sovereignty and supremacy. They were characteristic of the rituals in the asvamedha and the rajasuya sacrifices. This was the time by which the dana had been transformed into dakshina. One example of akhyana is Devasuram which narrated the war between the gods and demons. It is mentioned in the Brahmana literature. Another example was the recitation of the akhyana by a priest during the pariplava cycle (recitation of the narratives for a year in cycles of ten days each) of the asvamedha sacrifice. Most of it was related to the eulogies of the raja. Past rajas who had performed the horse sacrifice are mentioned and the ‘cycle thereby became a mechanism for remembering a past’. Its close association with the itihasa and purana is evident from the fact that in pariplava, the ten day cycle of akhyanas, the eighth day is reserved for itihasa and the ninth day for purana. A separate class of literary men arose who specialised in akhyana literature. In general, akhyana means a historical narrative (Pathak 1966). Later the akhyanas were assimilated in the itihasa-purana tradition.

Different segments of oral tradition were characterised by the fluidity of their contents and constant revision. The Mahabharata which belongs to the itihasa tradition contained many gathas. Sometimes gathas and narasamsis were presented in a combined form, and at other times, they were inserted in itihasa and purana. The Mahabharata apart from being mentioned as a great akhyana itself, consisted of many akhyanas. Likewise Sage Valmiki composed the Ramayana by using the material collected from the gathas and akhyanas relating to the greatness of Rama. In the Puranas, the akhyanas and supplementary akhyanas were important constituents. They were collated and systematised in a framework of vamsa and were utilised as vamsanucharita.

By the end of the Later Vedic period the massive tradition of itihasa-purana had come into force. It is an all-encompassing category including specific texts. Though the heroic deeds were important to begin with, gradually the focus shifted to yajna even though the gift continued to be important. Thapar maintains that the clan
societies recognised past as being important but the ordering of the past as history was not considered significant. What was important is that the historical tradition consisted of those segments which by themselves were woven into what was projected as the past in the literature of these early societies. It was through ritual or from being embedded in the religious context that the past was ordered and remembered. Only that was recorded and remembered from the past which alluded to the power of those who conducted raids to augment their wealth and later became yajamanas of the sacrifices. The narratives were varied but they in all cases owed their attribution to the brahmanas. The separation between the brahmanas and kshatriyas made possible for the brahmanas to endorse the activities of the kshatriyas particularly those claims which attempted to suggest a continuity of the identity of power among a clan from earlier to later times.

Check Your Progress-1

1) Describe how dana-stuti hymns, narasamsis and akhyanas embody historical consciousness?

..........................................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................................

2) What is itihas-purana tradition?

..........................................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................................
..........................................................................................................................................................

2.4 THE EPICS

The Epics initially were oral compositions which came to be collated and connected through a narrative at a later date. This is why it is problematic to date them. They describe events earlier than the period during which they were composed. They also carry elements of embedded history. Again it is important to emphasise that they are not history in the proper sense of the term but contain narratives about what was believed to have happened. The two main Epics in India are the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Both contain interpolations and thus cannot be said to be the work of a single author. In the Mahabharata the narrative sections point to a background of clan societies but the didactic interpolations represent kingdoms. The poetry in the Epics can be traced back to the dana-stuti hymns of the Rig Veda, gathas, narasamsis and akhyanas of the Vedic literature. There are narratives from earlier times which were retold pointing to the changes. The focus was on rajas or kings. Both the Epics emerged out of the katha or narrating stories. The earlier form of Ramayana was called Rama-katha and the Mahabharata as Bharata. Both have a distinct locale and the narratives revolve around two main lineages. Thus in the Mahabharata the focus is on the Western Ganga valley and Aila lineage. The Ramayana has its focus on the Middle Ganga valley and concerns the Ikshvaku lineage. The Mahabharata has undergone three phases of change – ‘the original composition was given literary rendering by Vyasa, subsequent to which were added the interpolations by later redactors, probably the Bhrugas. The last phase propagated kingship and the worship of Vishnu’ (Thapar 2013: 147).
The *Mahabharata* consists of eighteen *parvans* (books). Some of the *parvans* constitute the core of the Epic while many others were interpolations. The Epic narrates a feud between the Kauravas and the Pandavas over control of territory and political supremacy. Both are the descendents of Puru. The figures associated with the Pandavas include Krsna of the Vrsni clan. Originally a part of the oral, bardic tradition, the *Mahabharata* was recited at the *yajna* in the Maimisa forest and the *sarpa-yajna* of Janamejaya. Its core reflects a pastoral-agricultural society of the world of heroes and their lineage based system (*sabhaparvan*) transforming to a more clearly agrarian society and monarchical state system of the Ganga valley (*Santiparvan*). The social configurations of the lineage based society were altered with the gradual transition to monarchical states. The death of the heroes brought the lineage system to an end.

In the Epics the kingdoms are looking back on an age of chiefships. The purpose is to legitimise and validate kingship through ‘imagined genealogical links’. The past is important because it validates and legitimises issues regarding succession involving elder and younger sons and the problems of disqualification. The succession dispute between Yudhishthir and Duryodhana in the *Mahabharata* and issues involving primogeniture between Rama and Bharata in the *Ramayana* bear this out. What Vyasa was attempting to do was to cull and refashion the events in a manner that would underline brahmanical ethics. This also underlines the fact that the *Mahabharata* though originally composed by the bards was later taken over by the Bhrgu brahmanas who recorded them in a written form. The later interpolations are those which narrate the deification of Rama, passages on the duties of the king, discourses on creation, ethics etc. This was done to suit the requirements of the newly emergent monarchies and the new religious sects.

Certain important developments mark the stories of the earlier conflict (*dasarajna* or the conflict of the ten rajas) of the *Rig Veda* which have gone through exaggeration. The local conflict was conflated onto a war. As the stories took shape, along with the migrations of the people, alliances and identities would have changed. Many stories were added to the central narrative or may have been subtracted. The text became frozen only when it was written down and even then it could be added to. Only that was retained which was considered pertinent to the updaters, thus introducing an element of historical consciousness. ‘Irrespective of whether what is described is factual or not, there is a sense of the past, and of carrying a tradition of information on the past which is of significance to later reconstructions of the past’ (Thapar 2013: 149). Now let us study the two Epics – the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* in slightly more detail.

### 2.4.1 The *Mahabharata*

The Epic contains narratives about societies that were mentioned in the *Rig Veda* along with the inclusion of other clans and customs alien and subsequent to the Vedas. In it one can trace one of the two major lineages – *Chandravamsa* – to the descendents of Manu’s son Ida. The *Mahabharata* revolves around the *Chandravamsa* lineage and the *Ramayana* around the *Suryavamsa* lineage. The central narrative consists of the battle between the Kauravas and Pandavas, descendents of Puru. There are scattered references to clans and persons in the Vedic corpus. Some clans who are peripheral to the *Chandravamsa* lineage were also introduced and these along with the nuclear clans were drawn together when the war took place. It is possible that the peripheral clans and their stories were part of a separate bardic tradition.
Puru was the youngest of the five sons of Yayati. By the laws of primogeniture the kingdom should have gone to Yadu who was the eldest son. However he was disinherited and Puru was made the king. This indicates that at this time the laws of primogeniture were still in a state of flux. The rules of primogeniture are again not followed when Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra succeeds to the Kuru realm. There are many curious unexplainable aspects in the narrative. For example, the not following of the primogeniture rules, how Dhrtarashtra and Pandu despite not being connected to the central lineage still become contenders to the throne, etc. This points to the fact that in clan societies where kinship ties are important such developments can take place.

There are many sections in the *Mahabharata* which point to a clan based system. The Pandavas are challenged to a game of dice and the role of senior kinsmen were considered crucial to the narrative of the epic pointing to the importance of the assembly where senior kinsmen met and took decisions. It is in the didactic portions of the Epic (*Santiparvan*) that clearly defined descriptions of monarchical functioning occur. The king is accorded rights which place him above the kinsmen. He has the right to use force and levy taxes. Now the kinsmen are no longer referred to but the bifurcation is between the *raja* and his *praja*. The functioning of the castes come to play a part. The kshatriya of earlier times continues to be important but now there is a change in his duties. Earlier he was protecting the honour of the clan and his heroic exploits were noteworthy. Now his duties include those which are listed in later texts such as giving of *dana*, ordering of sacrificial ceremonies and the study of the *Vedas*. The list is lengthy and suffice it to say that the Epic narrative reflects a transition between two kinds of societies, a ‘new age reflecting on an age that has ended. The heroic world of chiefships had faded out and dynasties had taken over. But the latter were still seeking legitimation from the world of heroes and some of the new deities were the associates of the heroes, hence the need of the epic to continue in later times (Thapar 1979: 627).

### 2.4.2 The *Ramayana*

Like the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* too was part of an oral tradition. It was committed to a written form at a later date. It has many variants. Valmiki, who wrote *Ramayana*, seems to have used the earlier *Rama-katha* which itself was a compilation of fragmentary stories. A single text was composed from such stories. As was the case with *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* also contains interpolations and thus the dating is difficult. The *Ramayana* is a story that outlines the conflict between two types of society: the kingdom of Kosala and the realm of the Rakshasas. The hero of the epic, Rama is eldest of the four sons of King Dasaratha who is the ruler of Ayodhya. The neighbouring forests are the locale of ascetics who are harassed by the rakshasas. Rama and his younger brother, Lakshmana help the *rsis* in ridding the forests of the rakshasas. Subsequently, they proceed to the neighbouring kingdom of Mithila where king Janaka is holding the *swayambara* of his daughter, Sita. Rama alone can fulfill the condition that whosoever bends the massive bow would marry Sita. Rama returns with Sita to Ayodhya where his installation as the future king is announced. However, Kaikeyi, the stepmother of Rama, on being spurred into a tantrum by her maid, Manthara, forces Dasharatha to grant her three wishes which he had made to her earlier. She demands that instead of Rama, her own son, Bharata should be made the king and Rama should be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. Bound by the vows, Dasaratha had to comply. Rama along with Sita and Lakshmana decide to go into exile. Soon after,
Myths, Dana-Stuti, Gatha, Akhyana and the Transition to Epic and Itihasa-Purana Tradition

Sita is kidnapped by the mighty ‘rakshasa’, Ravana of Lanka. A distressed Rama is helped by Hanuman, a monkey ally. A battle ensues between Rama and Ravana and the latter is killed. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana return to Ayodhya after completing the period of their exile, where Rama is crowned the king.

The books dealing with the role of Rama as the incarnation of Vishnu; Sita’s exile and subsequent shelter in the hermitage of Valmiki; the birth of her sons, Kusi and Lavah (Kush and Lav); the son’s recitation of the Ramayana at the asvamedha sacrifice of Rama; Sita’s return only to be forced to undergo a second fire ordeal and Sita’s decision to merge with the mother Earth while protesting her innocence are all contained in later additions to Ramayana.

The rakshasas represent an alien culture which is at odds with the agricultural, sedentary society of the kingdoms. The forest is the abode of not only the rakshasas but also the rsis who symbolise a different kind of authority – moral authority. The geographical horizon of the text ranges from the Middle Ganga plains into central India. The intention of the Epic is to evoke the earlier societies which were still current in some form and the Epic records the change to more recent forms. The society was going through massive changes. New kingdoms were emerging, or a new state required legitimation which required the projection of the king as a divinity. Validation from the past, thus, became a necessity.

As far the historicity of Ramayana is concerned we will be discussing here the Jaina variant, the Paumacariyam of Vimalasuri. This variant along with Valmiki’s Ramayana and Buddhist Dasaratha Jataka were established by the early Common Era (CE). The Paumacariyam is in Prakrit and dates to the early centuries CE. According to the Jaina text, the other two versions of Ramayana lack historicity, and this statement according to Romila Thapar is a recognition of a historical tradition. She says that each version is making a statement; a statement which are historical in nature since ‘they reflect the social assumptions of a particular segment of society at a point of time’ (Thapar 2013: 212). In the text there is a mention of Bimbisara who is ruling at Rajagrha. Bimbisara is a near-contemporary of Mahavira thus alluding to the historicity of the characters. The Paumacariyam attempts to rewrite the story by depicting the rakshasas as being not demons and claiming historical authenticity for its version of the story. The focus is the Vindhyan range and all characters are devout Jainas. Genealogies of the two groups of vidyadharas: rakshasas and vanaras form part of the initial part of the text. Among the four descent groups mentioned, the vidyadharas are the most important. They are the bearers of knowledge hence called, vidyadharas. There is someone called Meghavahana who is one of the vidyadharas, who flees to Lanka due to certain circumstances. There he establishes the Rakshasavamsa. Another vidyadhara prince is exiled to Vanaradvipa, and where, at Kiskindha, he establishes a kingdom. The vanaravamsa and Rakshasavamsa are related. One interesting deviation from Valmiki’s Ramayana is that those who belong to Vanaravamsa are not monkeys but the monkey emblem is their standard. The conflict is between equals. The two vamsas which are important as far as the story is concerned are the Harivamsa to which Janaka, the father of Sita belonged. The Adityavamsa is also called Ikshvaku and shares some names with the Ramayana. Sagara, one of the earlier Ikshvaku kings, married a vidyadhara princess. Ravana is an almost universal conqueror and ruler. He is a Jaina and protector of Jaina shrines. Dasaratha renounces the world and his wife Kaikeyi wants her son to become the king. But she dissuades Rama from going into exile as her wish was just to see her son being crowned the
king. The Vindhyan region is the locale of the exile. Instead of the rsi ashramas there are Jaina shrines. The conflict between Ravana and Rama is not as brutal as is in Valmiki’s Ramayana because both share a predetermined relationship. Finally, Dasaratha and Rama renounce the world, Sita becomes a nun and Jaina ethic triumphs. Because of certain features the Jaina variant can claim more historicity than the other variants. The association with the historical king Bimbisara; denouncing of the other versions as fabrications, point to an element of historicity. Romila Thapar says that, ‘the Jaina variant alone is attempting to present what it claims is an authentic historical account; therefore the endorsements which it suggests are significant from the point of view of a perspective on the past. The claim to historicity for this story connotes a new concern with the past’ (Thapar 2013: 262).

2.5 THE PURANAS

The itihasa-purana tradition was finally compiled in the form of the Puranas in the mid-first millennium CE. It recorded history to the extent that it represents a transition from embedded to externalised history. It has links to the bardic tradition where suta and Magadha were its earliest authors. Later the tradition was appropriated by the brahmanas who used the oral information on the past and recorded it in a literary form relevant to existing circumstances. Each Purana revolved around a deity and represented an attempt to provide an integrated world view of the past and present. Its Vamsanucarita section recorded the genealogy of all the known lineages and dynasties up to the mid first millennium CE. It constitutes the epicenter of the itihasa tradition. It incorporated many forms of embedded history of earlier times such as kathas and akhyanas. The genealogical sections not only claimed to record the past but became essential to future claims to lineage power. Those dynasties which are recorded in the Puranas up to the mid-first millennium CE are descendants of recognised ksatriya lineages. Subsequently brahmanas, and even vrata-dvija, sudras and ‘mlecchas’ were also included as ruling lineages. In the post-Gupta period, new ruling families depended on genealogical links, fabricated genealogies proving their claim to being kshatriyas. All the stakeholders in the growing agricultural economy and expanding state systems such as the grantees, landowners, clan chiefs, ruling families insisted on their high status as they had a lot to lose if the peasants refused to till the land. The lower orders were to be forced somehow to service those who had risen higher in political power. The itihasa-purana tradition was one of the means to legitimise status and the vamsanucharita sections had to be carefully preserved. New ruling families of the post-Gupta period were seeking links with the Suryavamsa and Chandravamsa lineages, thus underlining their need for potential high status. The desire for linkages and successful attempts at forging the same, points to the reformulation of the data present in the Vedas and the epics in a genealogical form. The history of those claiming political power was embedded in this genealogical tradition. In the post-Gupta period, it were not merely rituals that were used as a source of legitimation for newly emerging kingdoms but the providing of history for the ruler, a feature of political economy. Thus genealogy is functioning as a useful historical and political tool. Those who had made themselves in charge of the historical tradition were
aware of their proximity to political power. The brahmanas through this tradition were legitimising the new rulers. The mid-first millennium CE was the period of competition and confrontation between different ideologies, rulers and religious sects.

There was competition between Buddhism and the Saiva sects and the Bhagvata religion. Those who supported the Bhagvata tradition, such as the Guptas were considered appropriate patrons. In this context a past was constructed where claims to historicity took the form of genealogies. The fact that genealogies were important during this period is shown by their increasing frequency. The genealogies encapsulated a consciousness of history which at this time took the form of a mere skeleton. This was to flesh out in fuller form in the succeeding periods in the forms of inscriptions, caritas and vamsavalis.

Check Your Progress-2

1) Discuss with reference to the Mahabharata how looking back on the past and recalling the societies of past times embody historical consciousness.

........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................

2) Discuss Paumacariyam and its historicity.

........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................

3) Describe the role of genealogies in the making of a historical tradition.

........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................

2.6 SUMMARY

As scholars have shown, it is not important to categorise a society as a-historical or historical. What is important is how societies see the past. In this Unit, you have traced how Indian society exhibited a sense of historical consciousness in the period between 1500-1000 BCE and then again from between 1000 BCE- 1300 CE at various times. It has become clear from the discussion that what is included as history in the present day is limited in its scope. The pre-modern times societies outside of Europe understood past in different ways, particularly what Thapar terms as the 'past looking at its own past'. We traced the beginning of embedded forms of history and how they moved towards more externalised forms; the latter beginning with the Puranas and ending with caritas, vamshavalis and inscriptions. In the next few Units we will be looking at how there was lesser need to embed narratives in ritual texts and certain new genres came into existence which specifically were concerned with the past. In the next Unit we will be studying the Sramanic tradition which was an alternative to the itihasa-purana tradition.
2.7 KEYWORDS

Vedas
The ancient literature of the Indian Subcontinent. There are four Vedas: Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva Veda. The Rig Veda was supposed to have been composed between 1500-1000 BCE and the last three Vedas between 1000-800 BCE.

Brahmanas
These are voluminous prose texts which contain theological matter, especially observations on sacrifice and the practical or mystical significance of the separate sacrificial rites and ceremonies.

Aranyakas and Upanishads
They contain the incantations of the forest hermits and ascetics on God, the world, mankind and contains a good deal of oldest Indian philosophy.

Eulogy (Prasasti)
A speech or piece of writing that praises someone or something highly, a kind of tribute.

Lineage
Direct descent from an ancestor.

2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1
1) See Section 2.3 and its Sub-sections
2) See Section 2.2 and subsequent Sections

Check Your Progress-2
1) See Sub-section 2.4.1
2) See Sub-section 2.4.2
3) See Section 2.5

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS


2.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corpus of Itihasa Purana
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7ASYbmdiEc

Vignettes of Ramayana – Perspective of a Historian
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsDsxO4krB4

Conversations with India’s Ancient Past
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wsu1Jc3y_sM

The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3rR_x24S64

The Puranas | Jaipur Literature Festival
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmgJQSkfQc

Kitab: Devdutt Pattanaik on Mahabharat
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmMHpGfU6Ww