H

Historical Methods

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In the year 1825, Harold Hayman Wilson, Member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal and translator of masterpieces of Sanskrit literature and Hindu religion, such as Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* respectively, sat down to translate parts of Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, the twelfth century "Hindu History of Cashmir," as he called it. Wilson famously observed about the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* that it was "the only Sanskrit composition yet discovered, to which the title of History, can with any propriety be applied."

Read closely, this adulation for the text's historical qualities was in fact indictment of an entire literary culture and civilization for its lack thereof. Just a few years before him, James Stuart Mill, the British Imperialist historian, in his notorious *The History of British India* [13], had launched a diatribe against "backward" Indian literary and cultural traditions for not matching up to their Graeco-Roman or Judaeo-Christian counterparts, which were famous for their historical traditions. The result was a downgrading and delegitimizing of indigenous Hindu, and generally all Indian, narratives of and approaches to their past.

Comments such as those of Mill and Wilson can be understood as both illustrative of and foundational in the then-emerging misconception and propaganda that Indian civilization, and particularly Sanskrit traditions, were singularly lacking in historical sense or consciousness, a notion that came to endure and enjoyed great currency ever since. This "lack," in turn, was believed to be on account of other stereotypes that were developing about India as the British colonial regime established itself in the early nineteenth century, namely, a greater proclivity of Indians to spiritual over material interests on the one hand, and a basic changelessness and stasis of Indian society itself, on the other. These together were deemed responsible for the apparent dearth of historical literature in India, especially as compared to the abundance of scriptures, mythologies, and aesthetic works produced.

Against this entrenched bias of 200 years, documenting historical methods of the early Indic civilization assumes significance. We will do so both by surveying the range of evidence available of early Indian societies displaying a distinct regard for time and time-keeping and preserving and chronicling events for posterity, as well as by questioning the positivist Eurocentric basis on which the modern discipline of history has come to exclude traditional Indian modes of narrating the past like myth and didacticism.

Conceptions of time and chronology are regarded as perhaps the single most important element of historical consciousness. Early India

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deployed both linear and nonlinear or cyclical systems of reckoning time. Among the former were a number of eras, epochs, or calendars known as *saṁvat* or *kāla* that were evolved and used across the centuries. The most famous of these would be the Vikram *saṁvat* dating to 57 B.C.E. and the Śaka *saṁvat* inaugurated in 78 C.E. Some others were the Gupta *kāla* (319 C.E.), the Kālachuri-Chedī era (248 C.E.), and the Harṣa era (606 C.E.). Though occurring also in texts, the use of these calendars is most prominently seen in thousands of inscriptions that have come down from early India. Early Indian inscriptions from at least the fourth century BCE onwards display an acute sense of history in so far as they were, by and large, punctilious about recording the date of their being inscribed as also of the event they were recording or commemorating, and the dates of the king during whose reign the inscription was instituted. Many of the more elaborate inscriptions especially from central and south India from the middle of the first millennium CE onwards, called the copper plate land grant charters, included a detailed genealogy of the ruling king and his entire dynasty. They also tended to give highly precise and complex dates starting with the era (*saṁvat*), year (*varṣa*), month (*māsa*), lunar fortnight (*pakṣa*), week (*saptāh*), date (*tithi*), down to the day (*divasa*), and hour (*muhūrta*) of the day!

However, early Indian conceptions of time were not confined to anthropic and quotidian time; they were as conscious of vast cycles of cosmic time against which also they thought it important to situate human history. Thus the concept of *caturyuga* or four eras to be found primarily in that vast corpus of texts called the *purāṇa*s. One *yuga* followed another in a cycle characterized by declining moral values and general lawlessness, which however was followed by another cosmic cycle of regeneration. The four *yuga*s in their order of occurrence were the *kṛta* (the golden age), *tretā*, *dvāpara*, and *kali* (the dark or polluted age). Together they constituted a *mahāyuga* (great era), and 1000 *mahāyuga*s formed a *kalpa* (cosmic aeon) which was equal to 4.32 billion (human) years. Each *kalpa* was divided into 14 intervals known as *manvantaras* (epochal intervals). The end of every *kalpa* was marked by deluge and annihilation of the world – till the next cycle of creation began. All these were exponentially widening divisions of time calculated in millions and millions of (human) years; our present is believed to be in the middle of the *kaliyuga* which clocks a total of 4,32,000 years!

Rather than see the *yuga*s and kalpas or cyclical time as mythic time, their sheer enormity and scale can be read as a statement on the unreckonable nature and vastness of time when seen from the very beginnings of creation – perhaps among the earliest expressions of the recent fields of "deep history" or "big history" which also seek to look into the very beginnings of the earth and the solar system. Further, the placing of moral order at the center of time suggests a deeply ethical worldview. And the cyclicity of moral ascendance and decline, where history and human behavior repeat themselves over and over again across the millennia, suggests that cyclical time was invested with cultural memory.

As mentioned, the concept of *yuga*s is best articulated in a corpus of texts known as the *purāṇa*s: ancient narratives on the past. Among the pan-Indic *purāṇa*s, there are 18 major *purāṇa*s (*mahāpurāṇa*s), such as the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Śiva Purāṇa*, and the *Śrīmadbhāgavata Purāṇa*, which were composed approximately between the third and ninth centuries CE, and another 18 minor ones (*upapurāṇa*s) that were composed somewhat later; and still other local or *sthalapurāṇa*s. The *purāṇa*s are essentially sectarian, encyclopedic texts in Sanskrit that claim to cover/deal with five themes (*pañcalakṣaṇa*), though they actually contain much more material: *sarga* (creation), *pratisarga* (re-creation), *manvantara* (epochal intervals), *vaṁśa* (genealogy), and *vaṁśānucarita* (biographies). Therefore, apart from Hindu cosmology and theology, the *purāṇas* also document vital information on ruling families as well as great sages, and their entire lineages and life-histories, many of these being historical. Thus the puranic *vaṁśā vali*s are an important source for recreating the political history of early India since they record important dynasties such as the Bārhadrathas, Haryaṅkas, Śaiśunāgas, Nandas, Mauryas

(founders of the first empire in Indian history), Śuṅgas, Kaṇvas, Sātavāhanas, and so on down till the Gupta kings. The *purāṇa*s are also of course a treasure trove of geographical and cultural history of early India.

A companion genre to the *purāṇa*s are the *itihāsa* texts. Literally, *itihāsa* means “thus it was” thereby attesting to an explicit engagement with the past in ancient India. The *itihāsa* texts refer to the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa (400 B.C.E.–400 C.E.) and *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki (500 B.C.E.–500 C.E.), which record in detailed and continuous narrative form the stories surrounding important events in the lives of kings and kingdoms of early historic India such as the Kurus and Pāñcālas of Hastinapura, and Ikṣavākus of Ayodhya, along with a host of other allied dynasties said to be ruling over a large part of the Indian subcontinent. However, the large number of myths to be found in them as well as in the *purāṇa*s has led historians to only grudgingly accord them historical status, preferring to coin the phrase “embedded history” for the aspects of the past incidentally captured in them. But it needs to be remembered that both epics deal centrally with the issues of royal succession and war, thereby reflecting on important processes of state formation in early India. And again, at the heart of both epics are questions of ethics (dharma) and socio-political legitimacy, which merge with the imputed divinity of two central protagonists, Lord Kṛṣṇa and Lord Rāma in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, respectively.

The earliest traces we get, however, of a society self-consciously recording and preserving for posterity the names and feats of important individuals are in the Vedas themselves, the most ancient literature of India and the Hindus (1500–500 B.C.E.). Therein categories of verses titled *Dānastuti* (praise of charity), *Nārāśamsī* (Praise of Men), and *Gāthā* (stories) provide accounts of meritorious or heroic individuals and their social altruism. In a sense, the same impulse is seen in mature and expanded form a millennium later in the independent poetic genre of *carita* which are biographies chronicling and, by and large, eulogizing the lives of important personages, most of them kings. Among the earliest *carita*s we get are the life stories of Gautama Buddha, namely Aṣvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita* (circa second century C.E.), and of the Buddhist king Aśoka, namely the *Aśokāvadāna* (circa sixth century C.E., composed in Sri Lanka).

Thereafter we see a spate of political biographies composed by court poets in regional kingdoms across the subcontinent, such as Bāṇa’s *Harṣacarita* (seventh century, Stahnīśvara/Kanauj), Bilhaṇa’s *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* (eleventh century CE, Karnataka), Atula’s *Muś ikavaṁśa* (eleventh century CE, Kerala), Sandhyākara Nandin’s *Rāmapālacarita* (eleventh century, Bengal), Jayānaka’s *Prithvīrājavijaya* (twelfth century, Rajasthan), and Hemacandra’s *Kumārapālacarita* (twelfth century, Gujarat).

Among regional histories, the one name that towers above the rest is the history of Kashmir that we referred to at the very beginning of this entry: Kalhaṇa’s *Rājataraṅgiṇī* (twelfth century CE) to which we will devote the rest of this discussion. There are two reasons for this emphasis: One, since this text is generally (and mistakenly) understood to represent the only specimen of true history in all of Sanskrit literature, and two, since it provides an opportunity to see other traditional modes of Indian history, such as myth and didacticism, in operation and how we may interpret them for history.

The *Rājataraṅgiṇī* or *The River of Kings* gives a continuous chronology for Kashmir, using traditional Indian calendars or eras, such as *kaliyuga* and *śaka saṁvat*, to assign dates to the ascension and end of the reign of every king or queen of every dynasty that ruled early Kashmir from its origins till the twelfth century. These dynasties included the Gonandiyas (fifth to sixth century C.E.?), the Karkoṭas (seventh to ninth century C. E.), the Utpalas (ninth century C.E.), and the Loharas (tenth century to twelfth century C.E.). It also recounts in detail a host of primarily political events that occurred during these regimes, and the policies, deeds, and struggles of successive rulers and courtiers. It does not merely describe these; it seeks to explore the general and individual causes thereof and provide a range of plausible historical explanations for these. Another aspect

of interest is that the poet Kalhana claims to have consulted local rock and copperplate inscriptions (*śāsana*) that recorded royal land grants and had evidently survived from ancient times. This is interesting since it gives insight into the sources that went into the making of the text that is today itself considered a source-material of history.

One of the outstanding features of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* is that it begins with a prolegomena clearly stating its purpose (*prayojana*) and its philosophy of history. Kalhaṇa states that "shedding both attachment and aversion, the voice of the poet should be unwavering when recounting matters of the past" (RT I.7). Modern scholars have read this as a statement recognizing impartiality or objectivity as a virtue in a historian. It is worth noting, however, that Kalhaṇa presents this as a poetic virtue and it may refer to the state of equipoise that Sanskrit poetic theory (*alaṁkāra*) of the times recommended to poets composing certain kinds of works aimed at achieving a state of equipoise or resignation (*śānta rasa*).

While most historiography on the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* has valorized its objectivist qualities, like deference to chronology, objectivity, and causality, recent scholarship has drawn attention to its poetic qualities and figurative aspects as enunciating a historicality deeply charged with culturally specific meanings. It has been pointed out that the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* was primarily a classical Sanskrit epic poem (*mahākāvya*), and according to the genre's long-standing and cherished tradition, the poet (*kavi*) was a seer (*ṛṣi*), who possessed spiritual omniscience and divine sight (*divyadṛṣṭi*). With these powers, which arose from his poetic intuition (*pratibhā*), he could gauge the real nature of things and even apprehend the different dimensions of time – "things that no one before had seen." This claim to epistemic authority, however conventional, qualified the poet to speak on matters gone by and, as one of Kalhaṇa's successors put it, rendered *kavya* as "a lamp that illuminates the past" (*kāvyadāpam bhūtavastuprakāśakam*).

Significantly, however, the poet's ontic access to history was inflected by *kāvya*'s didactic mandate to provide instruction (*upadeśa*) on a range of human goals and affairs, like piety (*dharma*), power (*artha*), and pleasure (*kāma*). In other words, history in the poetic mode was essentially ethical instruction. For a text like the *Rājataraṅgiṇī*, the area of instruction was specifically political morality (*rājadharma*) with the aim of ensuring social order (*yojanam*) and people's welfare (*prajānupālanam*). Accordingly, the primary enterprise of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* was not merely penning a factual record of Kashmir's past but representation of Kashmir as a discursive political space mediated by an ethical paradigm.

Thus, governance and kingship in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* are evaluated according to certain moral principles. Good conduct (*sat*), righteousness, generosity/liberality (*dākṣiṇya*), discriminating intellect that could tell right from wrong (*sārāsāraviveka*) and which encouraged men of merit, character and learning, and the will to enforce justice (*dharma*) and ensure absence of fear (*abhaya*) among the subjects – these constituted the personal and political values to which the king's commitment was expected.

Then, these values were plotted through a series of exemplars that Kalhaṇa identified in Kashmir's past kings, clubbing them in pairs elucidating their comparative morality. In this way, instead of being interpreted at face value alone for the facts and dates of history it reported, the entire *River of Kings* can be understood as a flow of ethical exemplars that unified this sprawling text in a narrative logic. In this traditional understanding, didactic and historical functions coalesced via poetry. This in turn meant that the model of epistemic truth generated by the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* was both transcendent, in invoking higher ethical ends, and contingent in so far as it was located in a referentially adduced historical past.

What's more, myth and popular memory were used to further this ethico-political agenda of history. Modern historians have tended to regard myth with considerable consternation, believing the mythic to be always fictive and false rather than a meaningful rendition of truth claims about the past. However, as Paul Veyne has perceptively observed, myth is not about the "real" as truth, but about *what was noble as truth*. Therefore, the standard of truth in myths, and their value to the narratives that preserved them, derived from

something other than the verifiable. Myths in the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* based on local Kashmiri legends (*kathā*) about wrongdoing kings and their cities that were catastrophically destroyed by the anger of tutelary deities (*nāga*s), or about the origins of the land of Kashmir in an act of the great gods as told by the *purāṇa*s – display precisely such a meaning and function in Kalhaṇa's ethicized political commentary. Far from being a lapse in critical judgment, their inclusion served a purposive, didactic function, which was critical in the text's scheme of things. By sanctifying the land and warning wrongful kings about the consequences of their actions, it provided the synergistic background for the unveiling of ethical monarchy and governance in the land of Kashmir, which seems to have been the larger purpose of writing Kashmir's history.

Thus early Indian historical traditions span a wide variety from the highly precise and factual, like the information inscribed and preserved in public epigraphs, to the ethical and didactic, like the literary representations of human history as a laboratory of social and political morality and a call to action. The sacred and the profane, the transcendent and the contingent were intertwined in this understanding of historical "truth." Indic historical methods have to be grasped and understood in this larger sense, sensitive to the culturally specific functions and purposes this civilization assigned the genre of history. For early India, "facts" alone were not supreme and certainly did not exhaust truth; moralizing reality and transcending socio-moral and spiritual shortcomings was more the goal of recording and preserving history.

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