
A Historiographical Approach to Ancient Indian Culture

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Historical studies on ancient Indian culture have thrown valuable light on almost every aspect of it enriching our understanding of the subject a lot, yet the real nature and character of ancient Indian culture still require to cross the boundary of the controversies. Is Indian culture basically a spiritual culture having no interest in the world and worldly affairs and developing a negative attitude towards history' and 'science, etc. being the prime factor for many defeats and drawbacks in the course of its history? Is Indian culture reflected in the degenerating social and religious rituals and practices continuing till now in the name of customs and traditions? Is Indian culture the same as it was in the earlier days indicating a tendency of 'no change' in its form and format? These and more such questions require to be answered for having a clearer understanding regarding the 'truths' of ancient Indian culture for which a historiographical, not only historical, approach needs to be adopted. It is on account of a non-historiographical approach, adopted mostly, that the basic characteristics of Indian culture have, often, been misinterpreted and yet claimed to have been interpreted 'historically. A historical approach is undoubtedly needed to make the past lively and relevant for the present, yet it uncovers only half of the truth. For unveiling the past holistically a historiographical approach is an important requisite without any aversion to a historical approach. In the following lines an attempt has been made to bring into focus a historiographical approach to ancient Indian culture as a complementary approach to the historical one in the same manner as horizontal excavation is preferred to vertical excavation for having a complete picture of an archaeological site.

It would be well to make, at the outset, clear how we differentiate a historiographical approach from a historical approach. To our mind, a historical approach, as is commonly held, develops in the centrality of the scientific notion of history which presents the facts of the past in a definite framework of time and space with a critical and maximum possible objective attitude whereas in a historiographical approach, without denying anyway the importance of the objective and scientific notion of history, primacy is given to the 'art of writing history' in which the ideology of the historian and the total perspective of the subject to be studied upon play important role in 'making' history. Thus a historical approach is mainly a fact-based approach while a historiographical approach bears some traits of a value- judgment also when explanation of the fact is made. A historical approach develops from the 'science' of history but the historiographical approach originates from the art of presenting scientific conclusions. A historical approach forms a bridge between the past and the present thus attaching a sense of contemporaneity to history that accounts for all its relevance and meaningfulness but the historiographical approach develops an understanding of the past in a 'historical' perspective without which any history will have to be an isolated history with a dominating sense of particularism into it. Historical approach is thus very appropriate for studying an event, a character, or a phenomenon of the past as an isolated and independent unit of factual history but to study a culture as the totality of values, a historiographical approach cannot, and should not be, avoided for it is through this approach only that a total perspective of that event, character or phenomenon may emerge with a historical background and then the complete picture of the past including its interrelationship with the present and the future may be achieved to establish the identity and individuality of the culture. A historical approach may develop into a historiographical approach if an ideology influencing the historian's mind along with a reference to the total cultural perspective are attached therewith. If historical approach develops in an interaction between historian and his facts of the past, historiographical approach includes in this interaction a total and cultural perspective of that past. As writes Finley, "The study and writing of history, in short, is a form of ideology" and ideology he define as a system of ideas concerning phenomenon, esp., those of social life, the manners of thinking characteristic of a class or an individual. Ideology, thus, has a great influence on historiography for which Momigliano writes,

"Historiography tries to discover the unity and the meaning of empirical facts by the application of critical research and of an artistic process of synthesis. The task of the students of historiography is to find out the historical method and the artistic proceedings whereby historians 'establish' the facts in their own individuality and formulate the ideas which are beyond facts." Historiography, thus, is knowing the facts of the past and the historian's mind simultaneously without ignoring at the least the total perspective and a historiographical approach is developed from a balanced combination of this all. It is clearly distinguished from a historical approach wherein the 'mind' of the historians as well as the question of perspective is tried to be avoided completely and which is strictly confined to the facts and the facts alone. Thus, in short, if history is 'secured' in a historical approach, its meaning and value may be known only through a historiographical approach. The latter, therefore, is a supplement to the former in which a third dimension of the perspective is added to the two dimensions, viz. the facts and the historian's mind as is indicated earlier.

A historiographical approach thus begins from an understanding of a historiography and the historiography or writing of history presupposes a philosophy of history which, in turn, requires a notion of history developed in a specific cultural perspective having a specific value system. Man being 'the measure of all things' emerges as a value conscious being, for whom culture remains nothing but a value-seeking and the history appears to be a process through which the stages of this value-seeking are made known to the generations to come. Man thus plays a vital role in the development of both the history and the culture, which achieve their fulfillment in the fulfillment of man. The notion of this 'fulfilment' of man may differ in accordance with the different notions of the nature of man, for no fulfillment can be considered a fulfillment, if it is not 'natural' fulfillment. Therefore, every stage in the development of a human culture, consciously or unconsciously, moves in its 'natural' direction and makes history also move naturally. The relation between man and Nature becomes, thus, very important in any attempt to know of the human nature. Keeping a 'historical' eye on this understanding of human nature one comes to realize that the roots of the modern western concept of man go to the days of ancient Greece when the relationship between man and Nature was understood in a part and

whole relation and the development of part into the whole was thought to be the summum bonum. This, in a practical view, could be seen in the development of society and state, and history could be thought to be a discipline having knowledge of human activities made in this direction. For its own nature, history, in ancient Greece, could not be thought anything more than a doxa which had to be converted into an epistemi and then a critical and analytical approach was adopted to bring out the 'truth' from the past-narratives and only then history came to appear as an academic discipline equipped with a sense of research, enquiry or investigation inherent into it. The concept of history has since undergone a number of changes but the basic idea of research, enquiry or investigation remained unchanged as yet and exactness regarding time and space of any phenomenon, personage or event has been the primary condition to establish its identity as a truth-finding academic discipline. The truth in history is a factual truth, which needs solid evidence to demonstrate its validity. This is the basis of the modern scientific concept of history having developed in accordance with the cultural ethos of ancient Greece in the western world and has dominated the scene in such a way that any notion, concept or tradition which goes against it is declared to be unhistorical as is the case of Indian culture which has been so alleged again and again.

Coming to the Indian side we find that the relationship between man and Nature is equally important here also but what makes a difference between ancient Indian and Greek cultures is that in ancient India the relationship between man and Nature was not thought to be a relation between the part and the whole as was thought in ancient Greece. This relationship between man and Nature in ancient Indian culture was a relationship of co- origin and co- existence. Man and Nature both were considered to have been originated from a common source known as Purusha, Hiranyagarbha and Ka, etc. and, in later days, as God or Isvara. This suggests that man in ancient India was not considered to be a part of Nature but a part of the Supreme entity of which Nature itself is a part and, therefore, ultimate end for him lay in developing himself in a divine manner through inculcating moral virtues and developing a detached view towards the world and worldly affairs in a way to transcend the worldly, and then Natural, boundaries and entering into inseparable state of existence with Brahman or God and then

perfection is attained in the form of self-realisation or moksha. This developed a different value system in India in which 'ireyas' and 'preyas' represented the spiritual and the empirical attainments respectively and then, with a practical point of view, a synthesis between the two could develop in the form of purushārtha chatustaya at a later date to attach a meaningfulness with all human activities which, in a general sense, is the subject-matter of history. History having a past-consciousness and also related inseparably with the value-system, formed a broader perspective in this scheme in the name of 'Itihasa' and it included all human affairs in its fold without caring for their empirical or spiritual nature. Thus, Itihasa is not a synonym of History as is generally thought and which is the root cause for a number of fallacies regarding the nature and form of Indian culture. History and Itihasa are not merely two words belonging to two different languages and having some resemblances in meaning. They are rather two concepts belonging to two different cultures with different value systems and having developed in their respective cultural perspectives in the historical manner. Their seeming resemblances are only the exterior ones. Internally, they are far distant and totally different. Unlike history, Itihasa lacks an inherent primary sense of research, investigation and enquiry and, therefore, does not emphasise for a factual truth based on specific framework of time and space. Originated from the word itihā indicating past-consciousness, Itihasa, undoubtedly, is concerned, primarily and finally, with past and because past can be made known through the memory, itihā is transformed into aitihiya (Śrutiḥ pratyakṣam aitihiyam) and then process of conceptualization in a cultural perspective begins making an emphasis on the 'preservation', 'protection' and 'continuation of the value-tradition when aitihiya is taken to mean teaching through traditions (aitikyaparampariyopadelaḥ). As no tradition can continue without a sense of value inherent into it, the sense of value-tradition and also an awareness of cultural-traditional values become automatically inseparably attached with the notion of aitikya and then, in a logical conclusion, Itihasa, with a wider connotation emerges. Thus, unlike the concept of history, Itihasa is concerned primarily with traditional and not the factual truth. Truth in Itihasa is more a value than a fact and, therefore, great emphasis on realization, rather than demonstration, is made in Itihasa. Exactness regarding time and space is not so important in Itihasa as is the knowledge of value communicated through it for that possesses an element of contemporaneity making Itihasa

lively and relevant in the days to come. Thus, a sense of generality dominates over that of the particularity in Itihasa that distinguishes it from history.

Whatever said above does not mean to say that the element of research, enquiry or investigation is altogether absent in the concept of Itihasa, neither we mean to state that an element of traditionalism is completely denied in the concept of history. The only thing to be pointed out here is that Itihasa and history are connotations of two different languages with different cultural background and value-systems having different approaches towards life and the world. Each of them has its own priority to be emphasized. Therefore, they must not be taken to communicate one and the same sense. Because every term or concept achieves its final meaning after fulfilling a number of stages of its development in a particular cultural background, it can be fully grasped only in its own cultural and lingual perspectives. Having translated into another language, the word may communicate a similar but, certainly, not the same idea. The original sense of an idea is definitely lost in the other language. Any resemblance between the original and the translation stands to be an external resemblance only which leads to a state of confusion if the two are taken as synonyms. History thus is history and Itihasa is Itihasa so far as they stand for concepts and, therefore, no condition of the concept of history can be made the basis for any evaluation of the concept of Itihasa. Itihasa has its own identity and its concept can be fully understood with a reference to ancient Indian culture and value-system.

Traditionalism being the dominant factor in the concept of Itihasa resulted into the broadening of horizon for the scope of history and the historiography. If history became related with not only the worldly but also with spiritual and transcendental affairs, historiography included in its fold all such sources which are in any way related to any of the values of human life. Thus, if Mahabharata tells us that all the purāvrittās and the tales, which are related to the teaching of the four values are called Itihasa, the Arthalāstra very clearly speaks that puranas, itivṛitta, ākkyāyika, udaharāna, dharmasastra and arthaiāstra these all are Itihasa. In this form, Itihasa may be said to illustrate the moral and spiritual laws of action and change by the recollection of past as preserved in the tradition. In reasoning (nyaya) particular instances

(drishfanta) serve to illustrate the general rule (tyapti). Reflections about human life and its vicissitudes necessarily involves a search for moral reasons and spiritual laws. Itihasa furnishes empirical instances, (pratyaksha-paridrisyamanah) of the laws of actions and experience which are made known by traditions" (agamikarthan karmaphala- sambandhasvabhavah). By connecting the particular empirical instances with ideal meaning revealed in tradition Itihasa accomplishes the impossible task of spanning the gulf between the empirical and transcendent.

With such a view of history, ancient Indians could produce a number of varieties in the historiography. Besides Itihasa, these are purana, puravritta, itivritta, gatha, nārāiāmi, akhyana, varia, udaharana and charita texts, etc. With minor variations or differences, these all had traditional form to present historical materials. Although a mixing of myths, legends and saga, etc. has put a question-mark on their 'historical' character but attempts of Pargiter, Hazra, Pathak, N.N. Law and Mazumdar, etc. have proved their validity as the items of historiography. Pathak has very successfully traced the development of ancient Indian historiography from its beginning in the vedic period to the historical treatises of the later days. It is, without any hesitation to be admitted that, if tested on the modern standard of the western concept of history, these items of ancient Indian historiography may appear as the poor examples of historiography but then one must remember that these do not belong to the tradition of that history. As the carrier and communicator of their own values and traditions they, undoubtedly, fulfil their job of 'aitihāsika' sources and before using them as the source of history they need to be analysed critically and reasonably. The eulogies and charita texts bear relatively more historical character but due to their style they too require to be handled with care. Thus, Pande writes, "The basic predicament, however, of modern historians seeking to delineate ancient historiography arises from the fact that for them the modern view of history is the only correct one and other views are for them correct only to the extent to which they anticipate modern view. From this point of view the puranas contain skeletal history in so far as they contain correctly regarded genealogies. Historical mahakavyas similarly constitute history in so far as they recall the deeds and character of ancient kings. Inscriptions like those of Asoka or Kharavela, Rudradaman or Samudragupta appear to contain almost authentic history in the form of contemporary records of royal actions

and politics. Kalhana's Rajatarangini in its treatment of contemporary history self-consciously follows the correct and objective narrative. Ancient Indian historiographical works are thus the products of a distinct historical consciousness and their value as a source of history be ascertained in the context of ancient Indian culture and historical tradition. Their different style and the 'distinct' treatment of the subject, undoubtedly, create problems in their historical character yet having a critical and analytical approach they may serve the cause of history in no less a 'historical' manner and also justify their 'historiographical' significance in the context of ancient Indian culture if taken in a total cultural perspective.

References

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14. For detail, See, Raju, P.T., The Concept of Man in Indian Thought in The Concept of Man", (ed.) S. Radha Krishnan and P.T. Raju (Indian edition), Delhi, 1992.
15. Kathopanishad, 1.2. 1.
16. "Dharmartha-kāmamokshanamo-upadela-samanvitam-purāvrittam-kathayuktam itihasa prakasate".
17. Kafikā on Panini (5.4, 23) says 'itiha' is a nipata, meaning 'upadeia-paramparya'. The same meaning of the word itiha is found in the Amarakola Vachaspatyam and Sabdakalpadruma which clearly indicate a ast-Conscionsness inherent into this world.
18. Taittiriya Aranyaka defines aitihiya as smritik pratyakshamaitihyam, quoted by Dube, H.N., in Purana Samiksha, Allahabad, 1987, p.93.
19. Amarakasa equates itiha with aitihiya and takes both to mean parampariyopadesah, Amarakola, 1,6,4,2,7,12; also, Sabdakalpadruma, (ed.) Raja Radhakant Deva, Varanasi, 1967, p.205.
20. Amarakosa, 1.64.; Sabdakalpadruma, p.245; Vachaspatyam, (ed) T. Tarkavachaspati, Varanasi, 1970, p.924.
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