Early Indian literature: A case against reductionist tendency

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Abstract
This article tries to look into the fact that there were varieties of early Indian literature, belonging to different genres. There were *Shastras*, or technical treatises, *Agamas* or religious literature and *Kavyas*, which comprised of poetry, drama, biographies, etc. The way to deal with these sources should be dependent on the nature and genre of the text.

Keywords: early Indian literature, Jatakas, interpolations, retellings, telling, etc.

Introduction

Historical reconstruction on the basis of literary sources entails many problems, more so in the case of early Indian literatures (plural because of large variety in genres, which in turn, meant difference in form, content and function). Among problems, one can start with a few general points like the fact that in their case, early Indian literatures always show a gap between the time of actual composition and compilation. This, in turn implies a large number of interpolations and extrapolations by the time they came to be compiled. Most texts are also internally stratified, that is there are different chronological layers within the texts. Also, the authorship is generally anonymous, mostly ascribed to various sages, and even when known, very little evidence is there on the social location of the authors.

Thus one invariably arrives at a huge literature, divided into different genres namely, *Agama*, or, scriptures, *Shastras* or, technical treatises, *ltihasa*, or, narratives on past, and finally the *Kavyas,* including poetry, drama, tale, and biography. These come handy with the problems listed just a while ago and are in a form from which history has to be 'prised out' (as Romila Thapar says). One comes across a lot many tendencies in the 'reading' of early Indian texts, ranging between extremes of rejecting them outrightly as lacking any history on one hand, and looking for real historical occurrences by finding archaeological evidence. The latter becomes futile owing to inherent problems of dating and authorship. There is one more tendency which sees the descriptions in texts as showing merely idealized and stereotyped images. It is in this context that works of scholars like A. K. Ramanujan, Sheldon Pollock, Shonaleeka Kaul and Urna Chakravarty become important who tried to bring forth newer dimensions in the methodology to deal with literature as a source of history.

In the context of literary images being idealized arid stereotyped ones that works of A. K. Ramanujan becomes important, more so city images. Instead of using them in a literal straight forward fashion, one must look at it in its entirety taking into account, its vision, perspective, and the overall structure. Thus, one can than enter into the realm of symbolic value. By quoting the images of Ayodhya by that Valmiki Ramayana, he conceived that even though the text may not be giving anything more than an idealized image of a city, yet an image can indeed be formed through the negation of what the city was not supposed to contain.

Another of his essays named, 'Three hundred Ramayanas', he brings out a large no. of versions, or more aptly, different telling of the Ramayana. By going through the Sanskrit Valmiki Ramayana, the Kampan Ramayana, the Jaina Ramayana, the that Ramayana and various folk versions of it, he focuses on the enormous variations in the form, content, vantage points, style etc in each one of them. Thus, the work very skillfully brings out the complexities and problems involved in using a text like Ramayana(s) as a source of direct history in terms of occurrences that actually took place, when clearly, an ocean full of multiple variations remain. In each one them the author brings out a fresh context out the pre-existing common code.

While A.K.Rmanujan's work focuses upon ways in which stereotyped, idealized images of literature could be used as sources of history, and myriads of vantage points in the making of different telling of the epics like Ramayana, Uma Chakravarti actually wades through the Jataka stories to construct history of those sections of society who never wrote and were largely left out of literary culture.

A large number of stories, according to Chakravarti had folk origins which were appropriated by the peripatetic Buddhists monks, to teach Buddhist ethics. When the audience was the popular masses, the content and form was thus moulded to suit the requirement of the audience. This certainly gave a certain degree of agency to the masses.

A recurring pattern in the Jatakas is the occurrence of a 'social dyad', consisting of a human, human animal arid animal pairs. The latter two bring to our notice a marked participation of the lowly 'voiceless' people, who otherwise never participated in literary culture. it could be an untouchable Chandala from the *Setaketu* jataka, who very confidently challenges a haughty Brahmana to an intellectual discourse and defeats him. Thus, very clearly the dominant order is being subverted. Certain other stories like the one in which a young bull calf doesn't budge until he spade his promised due by a merchant, serves

as an allegory for the rights of the voiceless, for all those who work but are not given their due. But representation of women in the Jatakas merely reiterates the apparent obsession in normative literature with the need to constantly guarding them and restricting their freedom. Yet, given the acts of subversion, one notices that representations are short of complete coherence, perhaps mainly because of the fact that the narratives were the creations of those who shared the values of the upper class at least in part.

In Chakravarti's article named, 'The Development of the Sita Myth: A Case Study of women in Myth and Literature, Chakravarti wades through a lot many telling of the Ramayana including the core Ramayana, and shows the way in which the chaste Sita myth developed, with its conspicuous focus on passivity and sexual subordination. This, she contends, shows that agriculturally developed society stressed more on chastity and passivity of women. Whereas, the tribal society like that of Lanka shows relatively free women. Thus, she draws a connection between socio economic conditions and women's position. She further underlined the way in which the non classical and folk forms of Ramayana could be used to seek the voice of supremely sacrificing and passive Sita. Hence, this could be one way to use texts for historical reconstruction, when one comes across bewildering varieties in even single texts.

Finally, one must take up the methodology applied in 'Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in early India' by Shonaleeka Kaul. While accepting the fact that literary sources do have their biases and perspectives, Kaul suggests that this could very well be identifying and then used to make out some historical meaning. On the issue of the texts being representative of certain class which uses a the legitimizing source, Kaul suggests that there are problems with the *Kavyas* being taken as solely expressing dominant ideology. Though, the point can't itself be brushed aside, but literature simply not be accepted as exclusively serving the purpose of a class. This shallow reductionism restricts its other meaningful possibilities. On text as legitimizing tools, scholars like Sheldon Pollock go to an extreme, when they simply brush aside the relationship between literature and political power as 'intellectually mechanical, culturally homogenizing, theoretically naïve' one, with no use at all. This is clearly not tenable, and the category as an analytical one is not at all useless.

Kaul works upon a new dimension of early Indian urbanism, of that of a behavioral one, in which the genre of Kavya has been used to find out how urban men and women behaved as social and sexual beings. The work derives heavily from the method as outlined by Ramanujan, who saw literature to be 'a repertoire of perception otherwise not available', and uses literally devices, motifs, and themes relating to the city which occur to make interpretations. *Kavyas* according to her resort to processes of selection, archetypisation, and generate a fresh vision of subjective reality which act as semantic codes. As per the view that the literature is essentially elitist, Kaul suggests that even if the content of the Kavyas were drawn exclusively from the experience of higher classes, images/notions/trends coined by the elite could also very well permeate popular/subaltern culture, and vice versa.

Through the study of Kavya archetypes of *Ganika* and

Kulastri, Kaul tries to show that there was a lot of moral and behavioral complexity. The generally held view of 'public women'/*prakasha nari* as being respected in the urban milieu owing to there cultural cultivation and finesse is wrong as there seems to be an ambivalent attitude toward them. They have been 'shown as those who could very well expect insult and maltreatment, very unlikely for a person who is supposed to be 'respected'.

Kulastri or the 'private women', confined to their 'protected' domestic sphere, are time and again shown using the 'closed' inner world, a construct of the patriarchal ideology, to subvert patriarchy itself. This case becomes very clear in the case of *abhisarika* who slips into streets for a secret tryst with her lover, but nowhere is she mentioned as a courtesan (*Ganika*). She is no doubt one amongst many sequestered Kulastris.

Therefore finally, one can conclude by saying that while using early Indian text as source of history, one must be very cautious ad should deploy critical tools of analysis which are source centric and take into account polyphonies, ambivalences, etc. Hence any reductionist approach which glosses over the complexities involved has to be kept at bay.

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