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RECONSTRUCTING ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY

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It is often that the first truly historical work produced in India was Kalhana's Rajatrangini (River of Kings). This consists of eight books, each called a tranga (ware) and is composed in Sanskrit verse. The Rajatarangini contains an account of the rulers of Kashmir, from the earliest ones to those of the 12th century CE, the period of its author. Kalhana was brahman, the son of a minister and he drew on a range of sources. Monuments, coins, inscriptions, royal orders, manuscripts and his family members and his own recollections of recent time, to write his history of Kashmir. He also attempted to explain past events, but often ended up invoking fate. Nevertheless, The Rajatarangini, with its awareness of evidence, interest in causation and sequential narrative is recognizable as a work of history. However, it is a text of the early 2nd millennium CE.

When 18th/19th century European scholars looked for histories of early India, they found very little that conformed to their idea of what a history should be. they concluded that early India was deficient in history-writing¹. This lack was linked with Indian notions of time. Indian scales of time were regarded as fantastically large, and Indians were accused of subscribing to the view that time flows in cycles, according to which every period of time invariably returns, every event is repeated, and nothing is unique and the theory of cyclical time was regarded as a hindrance to the development of true, linear historical sense. While nationalist histories developed in opposition to imperial frames, scholars like R.C. Majumdar, nevertheless, accepted the idea that history was relatively underdeveloped as a branch of early Indian literature. It is however, possible to adopt a different approach. Romila Thapar makes a distinction, between embedded history and 'externalized history'. Embedded History is where historical consciousness can only be extracted with effort, as in myth, epic and genealogy. Externalized history, on the other hand, exhibits a more evident historical consciousness, as in chronicles of regions and biographies of figures of authority. If we understand history as a mode of reflecting about the past, we can argue that a sense of history is present in a branch of early Indian literature in the Itihas-purana tradition. Even texts that invoke divine forces and narratives that are set in cosmological time embed within

themselves a commentary on their present, while at the same time giving an account of the past.

From later vedic texts (c.1st half of the 1st millenium BCE) we gather that a horse was let loose to wander for a year as part of the Yajna. During this period, vinagathins or lite prayers-one a brahmana, the other a Kshatriya sang about the raja's ritual and heroic accomplishment every day at the place of sacrifice. One can note that only particular kinds of information were preserved in the stutis and the songs of the vinagathins what was important from the point of view of their bardic or brahmana or Kshatriya composers.

The achievements of rajas were recorded. Not surprisingly, the composers of such eulogies did not proclaim their patrons failures. One can also note that it is likely that many of the narratives that were later incorporated in the sanskrit epics and Puranas developed from such stutis and gathas (songs), as also from vedic akhyanas (cycles of stories that commemorated heroes).

The Sanskrit epics: the Ramayan of Valmiki and the Mahabharata of Vyasa

Traditionally, the events of the Rama story are placed in the Tretayuga, and those of the Mahabharata at the juncture between the Dvpara and Kali yugas and the Kaliyuga' is believed. to have begun in 3102 BCE. The Ramayana informs us that Valmiki saw Rama's story with his minds eye and turned the vision into the Ramayana; he did so when Rama was ruling his kingdom. The Mahabharata; he did so after the Kurushetra war, which ushered in the Kaliyuga. The texts information about their creation does not tally with the views of modern scholars on the period of composition of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. There is broad agreement among scholars that, while the kernal of the stories contained in the texts date back to the early centuries of the 1st Millenium BCE, as we have them now. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are products of the final centuries BCE and early centuries CE. Traditionally, The Ramayana is regarded as a Kavya-a poem about idealized characters, the Mahabharata is not, the latter is classified as itihas, literally, thus (iti). indeed (ha), it was (asa). However, we cannot say with certainty whether or not all the events described in either epic are factually correct. Rather modern scholars argue that the Ramayana and the Mahabharta reflect historical processes of change. The Mahabharata contains the geneology of the lunar line (Chandravamsha), and the Ramayana contains the genealogy of the solar line (Suryavansham). While these genealogies* may not be literally true, they do reflect an attempt to capture and order the past or, to put it. another way, a historical consciousness.

References:-

1. E. Sreedharan, A Text Book of Historiography P-520
2. Ibid
3. A.L. Basham- Modern Historians of Ancient India in Philips, ed. Historians of India, Pakistan and ceylon, 269
4. Ibid