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HISTORICAL LITREATURE

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The historical materials are scattered and it is difficult to draw a comprehensive picture of the ancient age. The historical literature can be sub-divided into several groups. They are Puranas, the epics, dynastic history and biography.

The Puranas

The 'Puranas' serves as a source of historical facts of ancient India. There are eighteen Puranas. The puranas provides historical information of various dynasties. The fact relating to various dynasties and kingdom specially those about Magadhan Kingdom are collected. The chronological accounts given in the Puranas should be used with caution and care. In the Puranas, legends have been so unidentifiably mixed up with historical data that the data provided in Puranas, it is held that the events of the past would repeat themselves in future. An attempt to forecast the future has been made through these events.

The Historicity of the 'Puranas'

Though not history proper, the purana might contain historical matter alongside much that was mythological. And this is what the vamsa or the genealogical part of the puranas represents. F.E. Pargiter's two books, The Purana Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age (1913) and Indian Historical Tradition (1922), besides presenting an excellent critical study of the puranic texts, also deal with the historicity of their dynastic part,

It is possible, suggests Parglter, that after the religious hymns were collected in the vedas, the ancient secular lore that was left over had been collected in purana. Metrical accounts of the dynasties that reigned in northern India after the great Bharata battle (c. 950 BC) gradually grew in a literary Prakrit recited by bards and minstrels. After writing was introduced into India in about the seventh century BC, they must have been written down. There are clear indications that the whole of the Matsya, Vayu and Brahmanda, and portions of the Vishnu and Bhagavata puranas were originally composed in Prakrit. More precisely, these are Sanskritized versions of older Prakrit slokas. All the accounts are in verse in the shloka metre, except most parts of the Vishnu Purana.

There are instances here and there, of alterations, incorrect statements produced by misreadings, errors in names and numbers, but as Pargiter attests, no instance of deliberate falsification except in the story of the dispute between Janamejaya and the Brahmans. But the case is different with the Bhavishya Purana. Its avowed profession announced by the title to treat of future events (Bhavishya) is a contradiction in terms. The Bhavishya text has been continually tampered with and supplemented even up to the nineteenth century in order to keep its prophecies up to date. The pious fraud, says Pargiter, has left the ancient matter utterly vitiated.

The Ramayana and The Mahabharata²

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two old epics of India, provide us with numerous historical materials. There is controversy about the historicity of the Ramayana, and many scholars are of opinion that story of the Ramayana is fictitious. But scholars of all categories are unanimous in their recognition of the historical value of the events narrated in the Mahabharata. According to Dr. Majumdar the war occurred in 1000 B.C. Apart from the Kurukshetra war, the Mahabharata contains various accounts of social life and religious thinking of the people of ancient India.

Banabhatta's Harshacharita

Banabhatta³, the poet laureate of Harshavardhan, composed the Harshacharita. This royal biography written in ancient India is an important source of Ancient Indian History. The book gives us a report on the early reign of Harshavardhan. Though Banabhatta sang the praise of his lord, Harshavardhan, but it seems like he did good justice while explaining the important facts of Ancient Indian History.

Ramcharita

Sandhakara Nandi's Ramcharita provides us with further information on Ancient India. It has two aspects. In one aspect, it is the story of Rama, the principal character of the Ramayana. On the other hand, it gives us an account of the works of king Ramapala, the famous Pala king of Bengal.

Rajatarangini

Kalhana's Rajatarangini is another great work that the ancient kings of Kashmir used to conserve historical materials. Kalhana, the famous historian of Kashmir, presents continuous details of the political events of Kashmir from ancient times down to the 12th century A.D. Other religious books such as Narada, Brihaspati Smriti, Sukraniti, Manusmriti, etc are also useful source material for the study.

References :-

1. Puranas-E Sreedhan - A Text Book of Historiography, pp 317-319
2. Kumkum Roy-The Power of Gender and the gender of power, Oxford University Press, 2010.P
3. Ibid-p. 321, 323, 324
4. Kalhana