

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS CONTROVERSIES: A STUDY OF ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of historiography in comprehending national history and the evolution of historical writing, with a specific focus on ancient Indian literature. It discusses the proclaimed lack of historical consciousness in early Indian texts, attributed to influences such as religious and philosophical traditions and a disregard for contemporary and future issues. Challenges related to chronology in ancient Indian history are also examined. Contrary to the belief of complete historical absence, the paper argues that historical elements are present in ancient Indian literature, notably in the Rigveda and post-Vedic texts. The necessity of critical evaluation when interpreting historical material from these sources is underscored. An extensive reference list supports the analysis presented.

Keywords: *Historiography, Historical Consciousness, Ancient Indian Literature, Vedic Texts, Religious Influence*

INTRODUCTION

Every country has its own unique history, which serves as a reflection of its identity, culture, and experiences over time (11). This history is not simply a collection of dates and events but is deeply interwoven with the narratives crafted by contemporary thinkers and historians. The information we gather about a nation's past often comes from various literary sources produced by scholars, writers, and philosophers who document their observations and interpretations of historical events (16). However, the task of determining which materials from these vast bodies of literature will be beneficial for historical writing is fraught with challenges.

The term "historiography" literally means the art of writing history (12). It encompasses not only the practice of documenting historical events but also the broader context in which these narratives are framed. Historiography can be seen as the history of history itself or the evolution of historical writing. It chronicles the shifts in perspective and methodology that historians adopt over time, reflecting broader changes in societal values, ideologies, and scholarly practices (14).

Historiography is crucial for several reasons. First, it serves as a repository of human thought regarding the past, allowing us to understand how our ancestors perceived and interpreted their own experiences. By analyzing historiographical works, we can discern the prevailing attitudes toward different periods, events, and figures, which can offer insights into the societal norms and values of the time. This understanding is vital in establishing a nuanced view of history that goes beyond mere facts and dates.

Moreover, historiography examines the changing ideas and techniques associated with historical writing. Different eras and cultures have produced distinct methodologies for recording and interpreting history. For example, the ancient Greeks, such as Herodotus and Thucydides, laid the groundwork for historical inquiry by emphasizing empirical observation and critical analysis (15). Their works not only documented events but also explored the motivations and implications behind them, shaping the way history was approached in subsequent centuries.

As historical writing evolved, so did the tools and techniques employed by historians. The advent of the printing press in the 15th century revolutionized the dissemination of historical texts, making them more accessible to the public (13). This accessibility sparked an increase in historical scholarship, as more individuals began to engage with and contribute to the historical narrative.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, historiography saw the emergence of new methodologies that significantly shaped historical analysis. These included the increasing use of primary sources, which helped ground historical narratives in documented evidence. Statistical analysis became more prevalent, particularly with the rise of social and economic history, where data such as demographic trends and economic patterns were analyzed to understand historical developments. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating insights from fields like sociology, anthropology, and economics further enriched the study of history, as historians began to consider broader societal influences and behaviours when interpreting the past. These developments contributed to the diversification of historiographical practices, particularly within movements such as the Annales School and Marxist historiography, which sought to understand history through the lens of social sciences and critical perspectives (14)

In addition to the techniques of historical writing, historiography also reflects the changing attitudes toward history itself (17). The perception of history has evolved from viewing it as a linear progression of events to a more complex understanding that considers multiple perspectives and interpretations. Contemporary historians often emphasize the importance of inclusivity, recognizing that history is shaped by a diverse array of voices and experiences. This shift has led to the re-examination of previously marginalized narratives, such as those of women, indigenous peoples, and other underrepresented groups, enriching our understanding of the past.

The study of historiography is indeed a profound exploration of how human consciousness engages with the past, revealing the way we construct narratives that shape our collective identity. Historiographical works provide insight into how memory, history, and identity interrelate, illustrating the power of historical writing to shape our understanding of who we are. This perspective is supported by scholars who emphasize the role of collective memory in shaping cultural identities (19 & 20). Historical narratives and artifacts contribute to our understanding of identity through the lens of memory and history. Therefore, historiography transcends its academic roots, becoming a vital element in the human quest for self-understanding.

The nature, quality, and quantity of historical literature vary across different eras and among different peoples. These differences reflect the presence or absence of social life, beliefs, and historical consciousness. (1)

The curious understanding of the past, or historical consciousness, has not been uniformly present among various communities and in different eras. Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as Judaism and Christianity, inherited a powerful historical consciousness from Europe. However, when we look at historical consciousness and historical writing in ancient India, there is significant disagreement among scholars. A large section of scholars believes that ancient Indians did not have an understanding of historical writing. Notable scholars who hold this view include A.B. Keith, Vincent Smith, Lewis Dickinson, Winternitz, Professor Kavel, Max Müller, and others. All these scholars have formed this opinion based on comparisons with the contemporary world. According to them, the greatest flaw in the intellectual life of ancient Indians was the complete lack of a tendency to arrange their long history and developed character chronologically, despite their civilization being ancient. In this regard, B.A. Keith wrote that "despite the sufficient availability of Indian literature, the representation of history is so thought-provoking that there is not a single author in the entire great period of Sanskrit literature who can be recognized as a serious critical historian. (2)

According to Vincent Smith, the reason for the absence of historical consciousness and the tendency among ancient Indians to present historical events chronologically is that 'most Sanskrit works were composed by Brahmins, who had no interest in writing history; rather, their interests lay in other pursuits.' The environment and events play a crucial role in making any individual a good historian. However, in ancient India, there were constantly various events, such as foreign invasions. (3)

Such events continued to occur, but their impact on any Indian was possibly negligible because there is very little information in Indian literature about foreign invasions, etc. In contrast, historians like Homer and Herodotus were influenced by similar events, which prompted them to take up writing and express their pain. The presence or absence of historical consciousness is necessarily dependent on the beliefs and attitudes of a community. The factors that have truly obstructed historical consciousness among ancient Indians are rooted in religion and philosophy. The major religions of ancient India, such as Brahmanism, Jainism, and Buddhism, believe that everything is predetermined by fate and that whatever is happening is the result of our past lives. This kind of thinking has certainly influenced historical thought. (4)

Moreover, there was a strong philosophy of denial of life in ancient India. It should be emphasized that a necessary condition for engaging in historical research, that is, for gaining knowledge of the past, is an interest in the problems of the present and the future. It appears that ancient Indians did not possess this interest to the same extent or in the same sense as it is observed in other human communities. Indians believed that the present life and all its components are perishable and temporary, merely a link in the endless chain of births and rebirths, and they considered liberation from the cycle of life to be the greatest goal. The belief in the transience or impermanence of worldly objects and events gave rise to a profoundly pessimistic outlook. Thus, humans began to perceive their worldly life as ephemeral, and in comparison, to the knowledge of this temporary life, eternal spiritual knowledge, that is, Brahma Vidya, gained prominence as the supreme knowledge. This perspective was ingrained in people's minds, and any notion that contributed to the knowledge of eternal life was considered significant. Therefore, history, which is inherently temporal, could only flourish in an environment where there was a positive attitude toward life. Thus, belief in transcendent thinking is anti-historical.

In addition to all this, another issue in Indian history is the determination of chronology. The lack of awareness regarding chronological arrangement makes it difficult to accurately date the events of ancient history. The significance of history only becomes relevant when an event is mentioned with its date. In India, this difficulty regarding chronology is observed in two ways: the first difficulty arises in the complete absence of any mention of dates, while the second occurs when dates are mentioned but are not in accordance with universally used calendars like the Christian or Hijri calendar; instead, ancient India used Vikram, Shaka, Gupta, and other calendars. Therefore, it becomes a challenging task to compare such dates with globally recognized ones.

Another observation regarding dates in ancient India is that while a Hindu exercises caution regarding the timing of religious and ritual observances, this is entirely separate from the consciousness of chronology in the context of history. On one end of the spectrum, the calculation of chronology was done using fine standards like Yama, Nadika, Vinadika, Muhurta, etc., while for historical events, this calculation was made in terms of ages such as Satya Yuga, Dvapara, Treta, and Kali Yuga. Such a method of dating can never facilitate the accurate construction of history.

Contrary to this belief, a group of scholars, such as Dr. Govind Chandra Pandey, Dr. Vishwambhar Sharan Pathak, Dr. S.P. Sen, Neelkanth Shastri, A.K. Barua, and R.C. Majumdar, have attempted through their works to prove that Indians were familiar with the art of historical writing. (5) According to these scholars, Indian historiography has its own distinct tradition, which has been unilaterally declared when viewed from a modern perspective. The first mention of the word 'history' is found in Vedic literature, indicating that a tradition existed. There has been a tradition of Nirukta for the knowledge of the meanings of the Vedas. Those who present Vedic meanings in a historical context are referred to in the Nirukta as 'ityakhyanam' and 'ityaitihāsika.' The author of Nirukta himself wrote:

“तत्कोवृत मेघ इति नैरुक्ताः त्वाष्ट्रो असुर इत्यैतिहासिकाः (निरुक्त 2/16)

- 'Thus, the cloud is named, and Tvashtar (a deity) is referred to as an Asura (demon) in the historical context.'

In addition, in several places, the author of Nirukta refers to the historical aspect by mentioning 'tāittrreihāsa' and 'ityakhyanam.' (6) Dr. Vishwambhar Sharan Pathak states that there are some scattered mantras in ancient historical literature in India that were written in praise of the military campaigns of contemporary kings. Some mantras in the Rigveda are known as 'danastuti,' which praise the generous donations of Rigvedic kings. (7) All of these contain elements of historical significance.

Moreover, through the historical analysis of the Mandalas of the Rigveda, it is understood that each Mandala is associated with a sage or their descendants. (8) Thus, based on the lineage Mandala, knowledge of the historical lineage of the sage's family is obtained. The Gatha tradition plays a significant role in the construction of Vedic historiography. Gathas are mentioned in various forms in the Rigveda, such as Gatha (9/99/4), Gatha (8/71/14), Gathani (1/43/4), and Rijugatha (8/92/2), and the Gatha is also the oldest part of the Avesta. The term Gatha refers to the praises of heroes. Gathas were sung on ceremonial occasions. In the Rigveda, Gatha (10/85/6) mentions Narashansi and Raimbhi together. Dr. Baldev Upadhyay recognizes this as a historical component of the worldly stream of the Vedic period, where the objective seems to be to describe the illustrious individuals known in society and popular narratives. (9)

In the post-Vedic period and thereafter, other forms emerged, such as narratives, Itivṛtta, lineage, and genealogies, Puranas, and history, all of which provide some historical material. (10) During the post-Vedic period, a significant class of state officials known as 'Soot' emerged, whose primary task was to create and compile the genealogies of kings and priests. Nationalist thinkers have also held the notion that the Puranas represent the rich history of ancient India.

The term 'Purana' means ancient folk tales. It appears that some of the earliest forms of oral tradition, namely Gatha, Narashansi, Aravya, Itivṛtta, and Vamshanucharita, were incorporated into the Puranas. Regarding the Puranas, it is described in Namalinganushasanam:

सर्गश्च प्रतिसर्गश्च वंशो मन्वंतराणि च ।
वंशानुचरितम चैव पुराणम पंचलक्षणम् ।।

'Sarga and Pratisarga, Vamsha and Manvantaras, and Vamshanucharita—this is the Purana with five characteristics.'

Thus, the five characteristics of the Puranas are the origin of the universe, the gradual phased development and reconstruction of the universe at the end of each Kalpa, the genealogies of deities and sages, the cycles of ages in which humanity is created anew, and the genealogies of rulers from ancient times. Therefore, it can be classified within the category of history.

Thus, we see that there are clearly two distinct groups of scholars regarding the question of historical consciousness in ancient India: one group questions the historical consciousness of the Indians, while the other accepts the historical awareness of the people of ancient India. However, upon reviewing both perspectives, it seems that based on the standards for history established in modern times, most ancient Indian texts cannot be categorized as history. Nonetheless, historical material is undoubtedly available in ancient Indian literature, but it is essential to exercise discernment in their application.

SUMMARY

The paper examines historiography's role in shaping national history and identity, highlighting the evolution of historical writing influenced by societal values and scholarly practices. Focusing on ancient India, it presents a debate among scholars concerning historical consciousness and the tradition of historical writing. One side argues that religious beliefs and philosophies hindered the development of historical thought, leading to a lack of historical consciousness. Conversely, other scholars identify evidence in Vedic literature, Puranas, and ancient texts indicating a distinct tradition of historical writing. The paper underscores the necessity of discerning and considering diverse perspectives to evaluate historical consciousness and writing in ancient India accurately.

FUTURE WORK

The limitations of this study include the inherent difficulties in assessing ancient Indian texts due to the contrasting scholarly perspectives on their historical consciousness and the challenges posed by the lack of consistent chronological records. Future work could address these limitations by conducting a more granular examination of specific ancient Indian texts to better understand their historical context and contributions to historiography. Additionally, comparative analyses with historiographical traditions of other cultures could provide a broader perspective and deeper insights. Further, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate anthropology, sociology, and religious studies could illuminate the evolution of historical consciousness and historiography in India, potentially uncovering new dimensions and refining existing interpretations in this field.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethical considerations in studying historiography, particularly concerning ancient Indian history, demand a respectful and culturally sensitive approach to diverse perspectives and historical interpretations. Scholars must be aware of their own potential biases and strive to fairly represent the viewpoints and methodologies of different cultures. When examining the historical consciousness of ancient India, it is essential to account for the religious and philosophical beliefs that could have influenced historical narratives. Engaging with the differing scholarly opinions with respect and openness, while critically evaluating historical elements in ancient literature, helps in forming a balanced understanding. Recognizing the complexities and challenges in determining the chronology of events is vital to avoid oversimplifications and misinterpretations, ensuring an ethically responsible study of historical writing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the examination of historiography reveals its dynamic nature and its critical role in shaping our understanding of history. The ongoing debate on historical consciousness in ancient India underscores the complexity and richness of ancient Indian literature, challenging simplified assumptions about the absence of historical writing. By recognizing the existence of historical elements within Vedic literature, narratives, genealogies, and Puranas, we can appreciate the nuanced ways in which ancient Indians engaged with their past. This discussion not only broadens our perspective on historiography but also invites further exploration into the diverse expressions of historical consciousness across different cultures and eras.

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