



FACTS

against MYTHS

VIKAS ADHYAYAN KENDRA

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Inventing the Past : *Myths of Ancient Indian History — Part 2*

by P.R. Ram

Comment

Standard Indian history is mostly focussed on the lives of heroes and kings, their greatness or depravity, depending on the biases of the historian. On the other hand, the life pattern of majority of people and the system of social relationship have been overlooked. In a correctly defined role a historian instead of focussing wholly on the glories of rulers and kings must necessarily focus on the emergence and evolution of society in a historical perspective, including all aspects of peoples' lives.

History as a scientific discipline is constantly under pressure of interpreting the past under the influence of present realities. "Historical interpretation can therefore become a two-way process where the needs of present are read in to the past and where the image of past is sought to be imposed on the present. To mention two recent rather obvious examples, the theory of superior Aryan race came in as being very useful to Hitler and Fascists and that of Hindus and Muslims constituting two separate nations was used to justify the creation of Pakistan" (Romila Thapar, 1975).

While on one hand historiography is adopting more and more rigorous methods in investigating the past — the use of archeological evidence, more precise use of sources e.g. carbon dating, and overcoming the 'narration of events around the king' — the communalists have concocted a new angle of history as such, and that is 'faith', as the determinant of history. Simply this is a level where historians cannot intervene except to maintain that belief cannot be considered as "history" and to firmly restate the historical interpretation. This is all the more crucial from a political angle as it indicates that communal forces have surpassed the limits imposed by logic and science and

capitalise on the 'faith' element for their political project. This is a marker of not only the 'success' of the communalists in 'winning over societal consciousness' towards a communal path but an indication of their 'success' in the 'communalisation of social space'. This is again a marker of the time that the logical historical understanding must be re-stated and all-out efforts to expose the historical myth.

MYTH : Women during the ancient Rg Vedic (Hindu Aryan) era enjoyed enormous social mobility and social status and participated actively in Vedic rituals

FACT : This is not wholly correct. Vedic religion no doubt provided tremendous importance to such values as the need for complementarity between husband and wife including the relevance of femininity. This recognition however was demarcated firmly within an institutional boundary that was clearly patriarchal. It was only within this social parameter women were provided space for themselves. For instance in Vedic marriage the male (Brahman) must be mature with high Vedic learning a necessary prerequisite for occupation. Women on the other hand were to possess beautiful fertility, high domestic skills, service and devotion, and the aesthetics of pleasure. The marriage also included a prayer to Visvasu, protector of virgins and to ensure that the new bride would be a mother of sons; she was to show no anger or hostility to her husband but instead tenderness and to be devoted to the gods and be a queen to her in-laws. While her role as wife and mother was esteemed, the husband's role was dominant. As the head of the household, he was host of the guests and gods.

Again in the Rg Veda the daughter (duhita) and maiden (kanya) were praised for their youth and beauty,

radiance, appealing adornment, sweet adours, ample hips, and broad thighs. All this suggests interest in female sensuality and her child-bearing capacity.

Again, it is true that in the Rg Veda there were women seers. But the Rg Veda which consists of over a thousand hymns — of which those related partly or wholly to women seers are not more than 15 at the most — that is, approximately one percent. The representation of women seers is thus evidently marginal. If this is supposed to prove that women had access to the construction of prestigious, sacral traditions, it is not particularly inspiring. Moreover, post-Vedic tradition highly exaggerated the number of female 'rsis' by ascribing the status of rsika to female figures merely mentioned by name in a hymn. Equally relevant, that while there were women philosophers like Gargi, women rarely figure as students or teachers in formal situations of transmitting knowledge.

Textual evidence also show the gulf that existed between the sexes at the educational level had also widened. With the increasing importance of a son — considered the boat that carried his father to heaven — rituals to prevent the birth of a girl increased and discriminated against. And as the polarity (*sauca*) and impure (*asauca*) became the norm as a religious category, women came to be viewed increasingly as impure during menstruation and pregnancy.

The issue of Vedic education for women became especially significant in later ages in view of the fact that knowledge of the *Samhita* and the '*vedangas*' (the auxiliary branches of learning, such as pronunciation, meter, grammar, etymology, astronomy, and ceremony) defined the status of the Brahmins, who claimed to be gods on earth (*bhudevata*) and the highest caste (*varna*) in the social order. Along with elaborate ritualisms, knowledge (*jnana*) became the religious idiom of the Brahmins and, by extension, of others who were dependent for religious leadership on the expertise of Brahmin men as priests and exegetes. Although the Brahmin caste prided itself on learning, yet Brahmin women were by and large without extensive learning in the post Brahmana age. Moreover, anyone without at least some Sanskrit learning was viewed as '*asamskṛta*', that is, as positively uncultured. The extreme of being uncultured was represented by Shudras who were thought to be '*avaidika*' (without knowledge of Veda and *vedanga*). As such Shudras were denied access to Vedic ritual. If Brahmin women were not learned (*pandita*), were they not like the Shudras?

Since chastity and purity became a substitute for knowledge and this in turn led to a view that women were ignorant and incapable, even if chaste and honoured. On one hand this led to the belief that women

are, especially during menstruation and childbirth, a source of pollution as great as that associated with untouchables, and hence of comparable social worth; on the other hand, it has led to their veneration as pure being whose condition reflects on the honour and status of their menfolk. These two beliefs, though apparently resulting in quite contrary evaluation of women, share in common the social concomitant of male control. Whereas the impure woman is believed to be dangerous, with a destructive yet potentially creative capability, the pure woman is believed to be herself in danger and hence in need of protection (male control).

Again, according to the '*Manusmṛiti*' women were denied access to '*upanayana*' or initiation. However, an attempt to systematize the situation substitutes were suggested: for women, marriage was considered as equivalent to the initiation of the male, serving the husband was equated with the period of studentship, and the performance of household duties was identified with the worship of the sacred fire. This means that any non-domestic activity was viewed as unwomanly or unwifely.

They were to be under control of the father, husband or son depending on the stage of their life, and even in her own house she was not supposed to do anything independently. She was regarded as the '*property*' of her protectors, and irrespective of the qualities of her husband was supposed to worship him, while the man was free to abandon her if she was diseased or on some such pretext.

The scriptural text, the *Manusmṛiti*, equated the womb to the field in which men sow seed and so the '*produce*' is his, as the '*field*' is owned by the man'. "What emerges then is that both in Vedic traditions and in *Manusmṛiti*, the relationship between men and women was structured in terms of '*inequality*!'" (Kumkum Roy). Women's participation in the religious rituals was sanctioned, but again as subordinate being. It was the man Yajaman (the host), who commissioned the priest for rituals, and logically the word Yajaman has no feminine equivalent. Though his wife was required to participate in the rituals, there were provisions for continuing these even in her absence, and also for obtaining another wife. Roy further observes that their participation in these rituals was meant to give them a message that "women were instrumental but not in control of procreation, that they were ideally possessions rather than owners and that their subordination was divinely ordained". This notion of '*ideal subservient wife*' was thus systematically developed in *Manusmṛiti* (MS). The wife was expected to the thrifty (MS, V 149) to obey her husband in life and death even if he was devoid of qualities (MS V 151, 154), and to observe celibacy after his death (MS V 160), wives were to be protected (by domesticating

them) and were imbued with the belief that this was in their own good (M S IX 6-12), disobedient women were threatened with dire consequences in both present and subsequent births (M S V 164), and husband had a unquestioning right to beat his wife (MS VIII. 371).

"The only category of women who had a large measure of what were regarded by law books as 'normal' activities of a woman, and became either Buddhist nuns or joined the theatrical profession or became courtesans and prostitutes" (Thapar. History, page 152).

Thus even in Vedic times subordinate position of women was a norm. By the time of Manusmritis it got codified and worsened, much before the so-called 'foreign invaders' forced the 'Hindu males' to keep them chained in the precincts of the four walls. Though there were 'few' women 'seers' also who contributed to ancient scriptures, their number is insignificant. Thus, overall, the situation of women was abysmally very low; at best subsidiary. "A widow had to perform a symbolic self-immolation at the death of her husband. It may have been the origin of sati when in later centuries a widow actually burnt herself on her husband's funeral pyre" (Thapar - 65).

MYTH : Indian culture is inherently spiritual. Ancient Indian society was a glorious civilisation, ruled by noble kings, and people lived in perfect harmony.

FACT : This is a figmentation of the British colonialists including Indology a field of study that had emerged during this period equating Indian philosophy, through design and ignorance, with religion, mysticism and spirituality. It viewed Indian philosophy to be synonymous with abstract wisdom devoid of its historical context and social relevance; that it had nothing to with the materiality of life as it exists — that materiality should neither be the object of study for philosophy nor can it in any way be affected by it. That is, an interpretation which held that Indians had always been in contemplation over the problems of metaphysics and philosophical speculation and were least bothered with trivial and mundane matters like the travails of daily life, etc. This merely helped in diverting the attention from the burning issues of the time — the concerns for industrialisation, technological progress and, above all, the struggle for freedom. This was how Indologists and Orientalists like William Jones, Colebrooke, Max Muller, Monier-Williams and others had characterised Indian philosophy. Ill at ease with the changes wrought by rapid industrialisation they found a utopia in India and looked for their own identity in it. Muller who had never visited India spoke glowingly of the unchanging Indian village communities. Brahmin pundits were so enamoured by his prowess over

Sanskrit that he was accepted as a Hindu, inspite of the Shastric injunction. They sent him the 'janeau' and Gangajal saying that he was not only a Hindu but a Brahmin. He reciprocated by adopting the Sanscritic name Moksha Mula.

Moreover, these European scholars viewed Indian thought as an historical discipline frozen in time, divided up into so many distinct and compartmentalised "schools" (Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Mimamsa, Vedanta, etc) each with their own inner logic and epistemological and ontological systems, but all attempting, in their own way, to obscure the materiality of life.

Paradoxically, however, this outlook was lapped up uncritically by even the Indian ruling elite and in exactly the same spirit.

Progressive Indian thinkers, however, like Prof. D. Krishna, Prof. B.K. Matilal and above all Prof. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya fought hard to debunk this thesis of "spirituality", etc.

There were also Hindu nationalists who harked back to "our ancient glorious past" presenting rosy theories (supposedly founded on Indian traditional thought and religious beliefs) which they then sought to implant on Indian reality. To this section such a spurious outlook serves as a convenient ideological tool to reinforce their own belief of being the repository of this spirituality, to reincarnate the theme of Satyug (Age of Truth) in the past and present Kaliyug (Dark Age). It held that in Satyug this great land had existed in peaceful harmony, its people led a innocent, simple virtuous life and the land produced wealth in abundance.

The nationalist movement also witnessed the emergence of a section of the intelligentsia who were deeply concerned with man's relations with man. Indeed, leading personalities of the time like Mohammad Iqbal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghosh had speculated on philosophical questions in the context of the anti-colonial struggles, but had, to varying degrees, similar conceptions about the need for the people to be led by leaders who were more competent by virtue of having attained a higher degree of self-realisation and self-control. This was but a spiritual version of Edmund Burke's (or Thomas Jefferson's) Theory of Trusteeship, in which those who were economically priveleged had a natural advantage in governance over those who were not.

Contrary to this claim 'there was no original Golden Age of mankind outside the imagination of later poets and priests' (Kosambi, 1992). Basing himself on new archaeological evidence and historical sources Kosambi stated that 'nowhere is any evidence found of

a lost Golden Age, an age of pristine glory. Man did not progress uniformly or steadily ; but he did progress on the whole, from a fairly inefficient animal to a tool-making and tool-using creature who dominated the whole planet far from being healthier (earlier man, added) suffered even more than we do from parasites and crippling illness that shortened his life". (Kosambi, 1992).

However, "the evidence of Vedic literature in itself points to a community concerned with mundane things of everyday life. Perhaps the most authentic comment on Indian spirituality comes from Hindu tradition itself viz., the four aims of man — dharma, artha, kama, moksha (duty, money, passion and spiritual liberation) (Thapar, 1994).

MYTH : The Gupta Empire was the Golden Age of Indian History and Hindu renaissance which reached its zenith during the reign of the nationalist, Emperor Samudragupta the Great.

FACT : Not so! This period (350-500 AD) indeed witnessed dynamic changes in scientific achievements which were partly indigenous and partly cosmopolitan — as represented in the earlier tradition of Charvaka and Sushruta, of Aryabhata and the later tradition of Varahmihira. However, D.N. Jha (1995) reveals that the most important evidence for this myth is based on the

writings of the poet and dramatist, Kalidasa, the composition of some of the Puranas, and in the coins and inscriptions which indicate that the Gupta kings patronised the two Brahmanical sects, Vaishnavism and Shaivism. However, the works of Kalidasa merely imply a further development of the literary forms and styles which were evolving in the earlier period. The Puranas, for instance, had existed much before the time of the Guptas in the form of bardic literature. In the Gupta period they were finally collated, compiled and given their present form. Still further, these developments were reaching great heights, even in the earlier Kushan empire (first to fourth centuries). The archaeological evidence is certainly much stronger for the Kushan cities. It is also during the Kushan period that we have well-struck uniform gold coins coming into currency, and these have been found to reach as far as Rome, indicating a much more extensive trade.

This myth permeates most standard works on Indian history. The crowning glory of the Gupta sculpture for instance are the Buddhist images from Sarnat; the best contemporary paintings from Ajantha have Buddhist themes. These were all Buddhist creations! Progress in astronomical knowledge as represented in the writings of Aryabhata and Varahamihira owed, only in part, to indigenous tradition. One of the five astronomical systems dealt with by Varahamihira was the *Romakasidhanta*, which evidently referred to the Roman system; another the *Paulishasidhanta* is



Uttam Ghosh, based on Sangholi sculpture, National Museum, New Delhi



Uttam Ghosh, based on Mathura sculpture, National Museum, New Delhi

The prosperity of the Kushan period is symbolised by the woman bedecked in jewellery as she sips her wine, and the pot-bellied god of wealth, Kubera. Both testify also to the sculptor's art in Kushan times

Courtesy : Commnet Project, Media.

explained as a recollection of the name of the classical astronomer Paul of Alexandria.²⁰ following.

The Gupta rulers, with the exception of the 'ignoble' Ramagupta, are also credited with a revival of 'nationalism' presumably because they fought against the Shakas and the Huns. According to Prof. Kesavan Veluthat of Mangalore University the only positive evidence of any direct engagement which the Guptas had with the Hunas comes from the fragmentary play, *Devichandraguptam*, where Ramgupta is shown to have been defeated by them and also nearly surrendered his queen Dhruvadevi to them! No extant court drama or Sanskrit poetical work directly refers to any Gupta ruler. The only contemporary reference to them is found in the Puranas, which contemptuously associate them with petty kings described as barbarous (mlechchhapraya), impious, dishonest (or liars), ...". The inordinate praise showered on the Guptas is found in their own inscriptions! Samudragupta's eulogy being the longest.

Following the decline of their empire the Guptas were forgotten. Their memory was however revived in the 19th century when their records were deciphered. The documents were seized upon by nationalist Indian scholars who used them, justifiably, to counter the racist commentaries of the British imperialists. For instance, that "India has no history, except conquest by a continuous succession of foreign invaders". This reaction was of course in contrast to some nationalists who lapped up the European Orientalist writings which projected the Aryan Vedic heritage of the Indian people as the pinnacle of human civilisation.

Some Indian historians have been so inordinately enamoured by the Guptas that they parrot incessantly that the Gupta era represented a "Golden Age" of Indian history. However, it was during their reign that in certain parts of the country serfdom appeared leading eventually to the economic bondage of the peasantry. Women became an item of property, and came to live in constant tutelage of man, notwithstanding their idealisation in art and literature. Caste distinctions and caste rigidity sharpened ever before; law and justice showed a definite bias in favour of the higher caste. The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim-scholar, Fa-hsien, who visited India during the reign of Chandragupta II recorded that the upper classes were happy and prosperous, and lived in comfort in total contrast to the lower orders e.g. the Chandalas.

The claim of religious renaissance during this period is also incorrect. The incredible popularity of Vaishnavism and Shavism referred to in this myth is not due to any form of a religious resurgence. Their basic tenets go back, again, to earlier times but in the context of the rising feudal conditions they could attract a greater

The use of the term "Hindu" is equally mis-placed. Inhabitants of Ancient India never referred to themselves as "Hindus". The term has its own history (see below for further elaboration). The much bandied about claim of a "Hindu renaissance" was in reality not a renaissance much less a Hindu one.

Finally, "In spite of emphasis on non-violence as essential to the best Hindu traditions, the glorification of Samudragupta is largely based on his prowess as a military conqueror" (Thapar, 1992).

MYTH Period from 3 - 4 millennium B.C. to 1200 A.D. is the Hindu period of Indian History.

Why is the Gupta Period singled out as a Golden Age?

For any period to be marked out in this way from its historical context, there has to be a reason. The speculation is that the Kushans were left out because they were pagans, later converts to Buddhism.

Though their empire extended right upto Kashi and they had been here for centuries, the Kushans were still considered mlechhas, unclean foreigners because of their origins beyond the Northwestern mountain passes (others with a similar address, the so-called Aryans, did not, of course, have to suffer this disability). The Guptas, by contrast were self-proclaimed protectors of brahmins and cows and worshippers of Shiva and Vishnu.

The awarding of such titles thus has little to do with history and more to do with the prejudices of the present. There are other such examples -- Renaissance Europe, seeing its origins in ancient Greece, labelled it a Golden Age.

FACT : This periodisation of Indian History is based on the work of the British historian, J.S. Mill (1777-1836), a Utilitarian, in his 3-Volume 'History of British India' meant for British officers posted in India. Mill divided Indian History into three civilisational periods — (a) Hindu civilisation (b) Muslim civilisation and (c) British civilisation. The roots of communal bias in Indian historiography were thus implanted. The periodisation encouraged the reading of the Medieval 'Muslim' period as either the confrontation between, or

the adjustment of, these two major communities. There was a tendency to project each as a monolith with clear-cut identities and demarcations.

Furthermore, while the first two periods have religion as their basis the third period is based on a geographical entity not on its religion, Christianity. Nor is it periodised as "Christian Civilisation" which should have been the 'logical extension' of the first two periods. This periodisation draws mainly from the religion of the rulers, dynasties. So here the history of society is equated to the 'religion of the ruler', placing severe limitations on the understanding of this history. For instance the "Hindu Period", B.C. 1000 to A.D. 1200, is periodised as such mainly because the ruling dynasties were Hindus. But the terminology Hindu emerged much later, between 6th to 10th Century A.D with the advent of the Arabs who referred to those living around the river Indus as Hindus (Cf. FAM on Hindutva).

The Arabs derived this term primarily from geographical terms, Hindush and "al-hind" used in Achaemenid inscriptions ('The Persepolis and Naqsh-e-Rustam inscriptions of Darius' in D.C. Sircar, Select Inscriptions, I, Calcutta, 1965 p.7) of ancient Persia and by later Arab writers. The terms referred to the people living in the areas of the Indus river and beyond, looked at from the perspective of West Asia. They initially used the term as a geographic and ethnic term, and by extension, it came to be used to those who practised religions indigenous to India and not recognisable as any of the Semitic religions familiar to the Muslims. This lumping together of all the indigenous sects and labelling them as Hindu, is alien to the earlier tradition where religious identity was by sect, and the term Hindu had not been used.

Thus on the basis of dynastic history, the use of the term in this way is totally incorrect. For during this period there were a number of dynasties which cannot be called Hindu at all e.g. Mauryas, Indo-Greeks, Shakas and Kushanas. The term is foreign to early Indian literature and passed into Indian nomenclature much later. Many of the kings were followers of Buddhism and especially in the period from about 500 BC to AD 300. Then again even this observation relates to Indo-Gangetic Plain and kings with their affiliation to different sects and cults ruled in different parts of South Asia. 'What we recognise as Hindu would hardly have been recognisable in the ancient period. The recognisable Hindu period begins to emerge in the post-Gupta period, in post fifth century A.D. There is ample evidence from sources of ancient period to suggest that religious sects and groups in Pre-Islamic India did not identify themselves as Hindus and as a unified religion". (Thapar 1992) In the earlier periods the terms used were Vedic Dharma, Shrutadharma,

Brahma Dharma, etc

In the second periodisation, if Muslim rule marks the beginning of medievalism several contemporary West Asian countries as well as Pakistan and Indonesia will have to be bracketed in the medieval age.

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1. Neither Mohenjo-daro nor Harappa is located on the now-dry Sarasvati, nor Lothal, Dholavir, Surkotada or Chanhudaro. Many Harappan sites are known in Kutch and in Sind, with a few in Kathiawad. True, the largest number of known sites clusters on the lowest reaches of the Sarasvati system, in Pakistan. But it is a matter of common sense that mounds of ancient sites have a much higher chance of survival, of not being washed away or ploughed over, if they locate on a river system that has been defunct for centuries, rather than on the banks of a swift river like the Indus. So the Harappan is not entirely a civilisation of the Sarasvati system. Apropos the drying of the river system, it needs to be said that the upper reaches of the tributaries, in Haryana, carry water to this day. Only guide books and crammers would attribute the demise of the complex social-economic system that constitutes the Harappan civilisation to the drying of a river, the latter wrongly understood as an event.

बर्बरता के इतिहास पर

आलोक भट्टाचार्य
(सांध्य दैनिक 'दोपहर' के सहायक संपादक)

"..... मंदिर तोड़ने का श्रेय सिर्फ उन्हें ही नहीं,
हमें भी हासिल है
हमने भी तोड़े हैं मंदिर जैनों, के, बौद्धों के
और खंडे कर लिये हैं अपने राम-हनुमान ।
धर्मराज्य की स्थापना के लिये जहाद,
सिर्फ उन्होंने ही नहीं, हमने भी किये हैं,
काफिरों की गर्दन काटने का पुण्य
सिर्फ उन्होंने ही नहीं, हमने भी लुटा है
हमारा ही था व पुश्यामित्र शुंग,
ब्राम्हण राज की स्थापना के लिये
जिसने हजारों निदोष बौद्धों के लहू से
काली मिट्टी को कर दिया था भगवा ।"

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