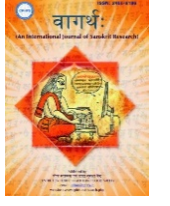




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Concept of Time and History in Sanskrit Literature

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Sanskrit is one of the great repositories Indian traditions. Sanskrit literature not only records the ideas of ancient Indian philosophers and historians on the concepts of time and space, it is also an invaluable source for history. The earliest elaboration of Time (*Kāla*) as an ontological category occurs in the *Atharvaveda*. The concept of time is elaborated upon in two of hymns in this Veda (*Atharvaveda*, IXX.54 and IXX.55). At the very outset of the first hymn, the seer views Time as a Mighty Horse running with immense speed, with seven reigns and seven wheels. Time here is viewed as an Ultimate with the eternal flow, in which everything is finally subsumed. 'He is the Horse but He is the Rider' the seer says- 'only poets (*kavayah*) and scholars (*vipaścītaḥ*) can ride over Him.' All the worlds (*bhuvanāni/ viśvā*) are His wheels. He is the substratum and the substrata. The worlds are his off-shoots, and then he is an off-shoot of these worlds. Therefore, He is the father and the son as well. He pervades all phenomenon and yet he also transcends it and stands out of it.

Keywords- *Kāla, Itihāsa, Manusmṛti, Ṛgveda.*

The seer of both the hymns describing Time is *Bṛghu*, who is also known as an up keeper of *Itihāsa*. The families of *Bṛghu* and *Āṅgiras* were involved in keeping the historical records and they are also associated with the creation of the *Atharvaveda* (Pathak, V.S.: The Ancient Historian of India). The *Atharvaveda* therefore is also known as the *Bṛghu-Āṅgirasveda* in the tradition.

Time is said to be the root cause of the genesis of all beings and all worlds and it is also said to have its genesis out of these worlds. In this way Time has two forms – It is eternal and indivisible at one level and ephemeral and divisible at the other. *Śrīmadbhāgavata* views the cosmos moving within this cycle of Time. The indivisible time can be viewed in fragments. It is the human resolve that would lead to such fragmentations. The indescribable would then manifest within the limits of definability.

Manu (*Manusmṛti*, I.64) has given the following measurements for the time which runs at the practical level:

Nimeṣa

Kāṣṭhā (18 nimeṣas)

Kalā (30 kāṣṭhās, one minute and 36 seconds)

Muhūrta (30 kalās, 48 minutes)

Ahorātra (30 muhūrtas; 24 hours)

One human year is equivalent to one *ahorātra* (day and night) of gods. One year of gods (*divyavarṣa*) is used as a unit for specifying the length of the four *yugas*. Accordingly, the four *yugas* are respectively comprised of 4800, 3600, 2400 and 1200 *divyavarṣas*.

Varāhamihira defines three levels of Time – *bhūtānām antakṛt* (That which leads to the annihilation of all beings), *vyāvahārika* (practical) and *vyāvahārānarha* (immeasurable).

These concepts and measurements related to time incorporating both the macro and micro levels suggest that the Indian in ancient times were attentive to Time as the Absolute and time as visualized through history as well. They also incorporated both these levels in the treatment of the *Itihāsa*.

The *Itihāsa* views time on both of its levels – the transcendental and the pragmatic, bringing out the spaces that emerge in its different segments. It is interesting to note that the word *Itihāsa* occurs for the first time in the *Atharvaveda* itself. It is said there that the Primordial Being moved towards the big direction (*brahatī dik*). And then *Itihāsa, Purāṇa, Gāthā* and

Nārāśaṃśī followed Him. He, who knows this, becomes the dear abode of *Itihāsa*, *Purāṇa*, *Gāthā* and *Nārāśaṃśī* (*Atharvaveda* XV.6.11-12). This signifies the manifestation of the un-manifest in a time and space. In fact, *Itihāsa*, *Purāṇa*, *Gāthā* and *Nārāśaṃśī* are genres embodying the historical consciousness of Indian mind. While the first three comprised the descriptions of the heroic deeds of a noble person, the *Gāthā* presented eulogy to such a person in lyric form. The *R̥gveda* refers to a number of poets who composed the *Gāthās* as the *Gāthākāras* or *Gāthins*. The seers belonging to the families of the Bhrgus, the Kaṇvas and the Aṅgirasas were known to have been composing the *Gāthās* (*R̥gveda*, VIII.2.38, I.4.34). Kaṇva refers to the *Gāthā* composed by him in *R̥gveda* (*R̥gveda*, VIII.32.1). The seers of the Aṅgiras family were historians in the sense they that preserved the vast storage of *Gāthās*. *Nārāśaṃśī* is a poem describing some hero. *R̥gveda* also refers to *Nārāśaṃśī* as a popular form of poetry with historical contents several times (*R̥gveda*, IX.6.42, X.64.3, III.2.34).

It is true that the term *Itihāsa* as used in Sanskrit literature has a wider and different connotation than in its modern sense of the term History (which is also translated as *Itihāsa* in our vernaculars). In that sense the word *Aitihiya* comes closer to the concept of modern History. Epistemologically *Aitihiya* (History) is regarded as one of the valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*). In *Taittirīya Aranyaka*, *aitihiya* is recognized as a *pramāṇa*. The particle ‘iti’ literally meaning ‘in this way’ is compounded with both the terms. They however differ in respect of their range in time. The former involves multiple layers of time embracing past, present and future, whereas *aitihiya* is supposed to be limited to the happenings of the past.

In this way, *Itihāsa* and *Aitihiya* are ephemeral manifestations of this *akhaṇḍa* and *paramārtha sattā*. Abhinavagupta rightly points out that the prefix ‘iti’ in the term *Itihāsa* is indicative of events that have actually happened and have been seen, whereas the words *ha* and *āsa* suggestive of their continuity and recurrence. In this way an account of the events that have actually been seen to have occurred, and which might recur again is *Itihāsa*.

Through *Itihāsa*, the past, present and the future are viewed in a continuous flux, which is our way of looking at the history. The present is a tiny moment; it is through the flow of time that the historical present and our identity in it can better be known. *Itihāsa* serves as a tool for our search of an identity.

Both *Itihāsa* and *Aitihiya* became tools for sustenance of memory, and this memory embraced various layers in time and space. It could be the memory of a nation, a society, a family or a dynasty. The priests worked for invoking these memories and keeping them alive. A nation, a race, a family or an individual was able to re-discover and re-locate itself through *Itihāsa* and *Aitihiya*; Beginning from the horoscope or *Janmalagna* which served the purpose of recording the *Itihāsa* of an individual, *Itihāsa* had a range of channels for its sustenance – inscriptions and epigraphy, royal commands, records of families etc. Every temple maintained its records forming both *Itihāsa* and *Aitihiya*. Some particular families of priests devoted themselves to recording the chronicles. The tradition of *Bhragu-aṅgiras*

family, known from *R̥gvedic* times for its engagement with *Itihāsa*, continued several priestly families.

It is true to some extent that the ancient India did not produce books of History as per western standards, because the western idea of history was supposed to unearth the outer layer of the reality only, it had also to be perceived in the larger perspective of things that could have happened, that continued to happen and are likely to continue. This led to an amalgamation of legends, myths and tales in the makings of the *Itihāsa*. Then the concept of *Itihāsa* and its applications in Sanskrit literature do not altogether disregard historical accounts as such. In the large periphery of *Itihāsa*, History continued to be interwoven. Thus, in between the legends or *ākhyānas* in Vedic literature there are records of wars fought and battles won. *R̥gveda* provides narratives in History also. The History of King Sudāsa belonging to Bharata-family can be cited as an example. There was competition between *Vaśiṣṭha* and *Viśvāmitra* for the office of priest under this king, in which the *Vaśiṣṭha* family finally won. But king *Sudāsa* continued to maintain relations with *Viśvāmitra*, and the later helped the armies of Bharata in their attempts to cross the rivers *Vipāsā* and *Śutudri* (*Satlej*). *R̥gveda* also describes the *Dāśarāja* battle – involving ten kings; and having emerged victorious in this battle, *Sudāsa* assumed the title of ‘*Dāśarāja*’.

In comparison to the modern concept of History, the *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa* had a wider scope. *Vātsyāyana*, in his *Nyāyabhāṣya* on *Nyāyasūtra* I.1.61 rightly says that *lokavṛtta* – the affairs of this world forms the theme of the *Itihāsa* and the *Purāṇa*. Both *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa* were treated at par with *Ākhyāna* (legendary tale) also and were regarded as the fifth *Veda*. They were also invariably included in the curricula of ancient Indian Gurukula system. The *Chāndogya Upanaṣad* repeatedly described the study of *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa* along with the four Vedas as a part of Gurukula education (*Chāndogya Upanaṣad*, VII.9.29; I.63.89; 3.45.8). Both *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* are known as the *Itihāsa* as well as *Ākhyāna*. *Itihāsa* or *Ākhyānas* were presented on a number of ceremonial occasions – like performance of *Āśvamedha* or *Rājasūya* sacrifices or celebrations like *sīmantonnyana samskāra*. Kauṭilya in his *Arthaśāstra* prescribed that a king should listen to *Itihāsas* daily in the afternoon. *Itihāsa* to Kauṭilya is a gamut of six disciplines - *Purāṇa*, *Itivṛtta*, *Ākhyāyikā*, *Udāharaṇa*, *Dharmaśāstra* and *Arthaśāstra*. Manu also gives the ruling that *Itihāsa* along with *Dharmaśāstra* and *Ākhyāna* should be listened in every house.

While the Great Epics (the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*) imbibe the concept of meta-History, that continues to be re-written and re-states in all ages, History at micro levels continued to be presented through *upapurāṇas* and *sthala-purāṇas* a *sthala-purāṇa* presents the account of the past and present of a particular region or a city. *Śrīmālapurāṇa* presents the history and topography of a city named *Śrīmāla*, now known as *Bhūnamāla* in Rajasthan. *Skandapurāṇa* incorporates several sections dealing with history, geography and topology of particular places. The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* of this *purāṇa* is an encyclopedia on the region of Kashi, while *Nepālamāhatmya*

which also forms a part of this *purāṇa* deals with the History of Nepal. *Nīlamatapurāṇa* describes the history of Kashmir.

Kalhaṇa has utilized all the sources – inscriptions, royal orders, records, seals, etc. as well as ancient texts on History. *Kṣemendra* has composed *Nṛpāvalī* (line of Kings) before him, and *Nīlamatapurāṇa* comprising the History, topography, geography of Kashmir was also available to *Kalhaṇa*. *Kalhaṇa* and re-examined these sources, he has vehemently criticized *Kṣemendra* for giving incorrect information in *Nṛpāvalī*. *Jonarāja* continued the sequel of *Rājatarāṅgī* updating *Kalhaṇa*'s account up to the reign of Jainul-Abdin in fifteenth century. Thereafter *Prājybhāṭṭa* and *Śuka* wrote their own history books on Kashmir bringing the

There is a whole tradition of historical epics in Sanskrit where history reveals itself in disguise. This disguise is not a camouflage, it is an investiture. A historical event is interpreted to make it assume the legendary proportions. The authors of these epics are conscious of the fact that they are not just writing the account of what actual has happened, they are creating history. *Padmagupta* alias *Parimala*, a protégé of Kings *Muñja* and *Sindhurāja* in the city of *Dhārā*, composed *Navasāhasāṅkacarita* in 1005 ACE. A staunch admirer of *Muñja*, *Padmagupta* was shocked by the sudden and pathetic demise of his mentor in 995 ACE. In between the legendary accounts of *Sindhurāja*'s victory over the *Nāgas*, *Hūṇas* and his continuance his victorious journey up to *Karnatak*.

Vikramāṅkadevacaritam was composed by *Bilhaṇa* around 1085 ACE), it describes Both *Bilhaṇa* and *Kalhaṇa* both knew King *Harṣa* personally, both have witnessed the turbulent times during his reign. Their view of *Harṣa*'s personality and his history are different. Who is historically more accurate *Kalhaṇa* or *Bilhaṇa*? *Bilhaṇa* is nearer to the Indian sense of history.

Caṇḍakavi's *Prthvīrājaviḥajaya* together with the accounts of *Prathvīrāja* in the *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* have not been fully utilized to update the history of India during eleventh Twelfth centuries.

In the fifteenth century ACE, *Hammīramahākāvya* of *Nayacandra* ends in tragic death of the hero, written after one hundred years of his death in 1301. This is a glaring example of the care for Historical validity through an epic. This tradition has continued till nineteenth century, until the colonizers destroyed the fabric of faith and creativity in which the world of Sanskrit was woven. *Paramānanda*, a contemporary of *Shivaji* wrote *Śivabhāratam*- an epic to commemorate the heroic deeds of the great Maratha warrior He was followed by *Harikavi*, who wrote *Śambhurājacaritam* subjecting the life and deeds of *Shivaji*'s son, *Śambhājī Bhansale*. The life of *Śāhajī* (1684-1710 ACE) is described in *Śāhendravilāsa* by *Śrīdhara Venkaṭeṣa*, who spend his life in the royal court of *Tanzavur* under *Śāhajī* himself. *Kerala Varman* describes the life of the King *Swati Tirunal* of *Kerala* in his *Viśākhavijaya*.

Karnatak and *Rajasthan* have contributed enormously to the genre of Historical epic. There is a long tradition of *caritakāvya*s. Enormous literature under the patronage of *Moghul* kings was produced in Sanskrit which remains yet to be evaluated as the study in history.

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