ITIHASA-PURANA TRADITION IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Introduction

The ancient Indians were acquainted more with the art than sciences of historiography. It would be too much to expect scientific, serious or genuine histories from the authors of ancient times. It has been aptly remarked that the modern historian of ancient India unceremoniously discards the ancient forms and ideas, the very context of ancient historical works. The tradition of historical writing in ancient India began in the time of Vedavyasa and continued until the end of twelfth century AD. The oldest Indian historical tradition is preserved in the Rgveda. The Rgveda hymns about the Aryan people speak of the sense of history of those who composed them. These hymns constitute the earliest evidence of the historical sense in India. And the composition of the original *Bharata Itihasa* or *Bharata Samhita* and the *Purana Samhita* or *Itihasa Samhita* by Vyasa in theDvapara age marked the beginning of Indian historiography. The two main tradition of historiography in its early phase were the epic and Puranic. The Puranic tradition is relatively of greater value. The *Purana*kara were the first to record and preserve the dynastic genealogies and chronology- the two legitimate constituents or components of history. Their historical conception and chronological perception find reflections in the information they have supplied about the kings of different dynasties with length of their reign. They have provided the dynastic history of India in a very systematic way up to the beginning of the Gupta rule. The details of the Kingdoms and the dynasties of the Gupta post-Gupta period furnished by them with some chronological data though not very systematic are also of considerable historical value. This chapter will discuss the tradition of historical writings in ancient India in three different contexts such as the *Itihasa-Purana* tradition, the Vedic tradition and the Epic and Puranic traditions.

Itihasa-Purana Tradition

In fact, it was the *Itihasa-Purana* tradition, which marked the beginning of ancient Indian historical tradition. The three main constituent elements of the historical tradition were *akhyana*(narratives), *Itihasa* (pas events) and *Purana* (any old tale or ancient lore). These three constitute rudimentary specimens of history. In fact, they contained the seeds of history. *Akhyana* signifies presentation of history in a narrative style. *Itihasa* in real sense of the term signifies history, which appears in ancient Indian literature not only as a record of the past but also as a

trustworthy guide to contemporary cultures and civilization. In its broader sense, it comprises ancient events arranged in the form of story based on historical truth. The writer of *Itihasa* tradition took history in a very comprehensive sense and attached more importance to the delineation of contemporary social, economic, political, religious and cultural life of the people than to the mere description of wars and battles, political conflicts and discords, etc. *Purana* is generally applied to tales of primeval antiquity or ancient stories whether quasi-historical, mythological or fanciful. *Itihasa* or *Purana* in the widest application of the term denotes actual traditional history. Various legendary and historical accounts of the events of the past or primordial events of humanity have been incorporated in the *Itihasa* and *Purana*. The earliest form of *Itihasa* based on real or oral tradition emerged in the Vedic age. The written records of the tradition appeared much later. The written form of history began with written tradition. The literature of both Vedic and Post-Vedic times contains the rudiments of history.

Antiquity of *Itihasa-Purana* Tradition

The antiquity of *Itihasa-Purana* tradition can be traced back to the Vedic Age. The earliest reference to the word *Purana* occurs in Rgveda *Samhita*, the oldest Vedic text. The sense of ancientness of anything is imposed in the word. In the same text, it has been used in the form of tale of hoary antiquity, *Gatha*, etc. Yaska (who may be tentatively placed between 800-700 Cnetury B.C) also referred to *Purana* and *Itihasa*. He cited the Kuru dynasty as an example of *Itihasa*, which according to him, may be distinguished from the *Gathas*. He uses Aitihasiaka, for those who interpreted the Veda with reference of traditional history, which can also be supported by statement of Durgacharya (A.D 1300-1350), a commentator on his work. The Puaranic Akahyanas in the Veda were purely based on contemporary tradition. *Itihasa* as a kind of literature is repeatedly mentioned along with *Purana* in the later texts of the Vedic period as well as in the text of post- Vedic times. In the Atharva Veda *Samhita*, the *Purana* has been mentioned fast singularly along with three other Vedas and then conjointly with *Itihasa*. In this connection we are further told that *Itihasa*, *Purana*, Gatha and Narasamsis were known to the people. They being repository of age-old traditions were seriously studies by scholars and elites of the days. The Gopatha Brahmana mentioned not only purana but also the *Itihasa*- vedaand *Purana* –Veda. In the Satapatha Brahmana, the *Itihasa* and ther *Purana* have been identified with Vedas. The compound word *Itihasa-Purana* also

figures in it. In one passage, *Anvakhyana* and *Itihasa* are distinguished as different classes of works. But the exact point of distinction is obscure. The former was probably supplementary to the later. The stories narrated in the Brahminical textswere also based on *Itihasa Purana* tradition. In Taittiraiya Aranyakas, *Itihasa* and *Purana* have been mentioned together with Gathas, Narasamsis and Kalpa. The combination of *Itihasa* and *Purana* appear in the Brahadaranyaka Upanishad. In the Chhodangya Upanishad also *Itihasa* finds mentioned in combination with *Purana*. This is the texts, which specifically referred to *Itihasa –Purana* as fifth veda, the four veda being the Rig, Sam, Yajur and Atharva Veda. From the Upanishad it distinctly appears that *Itihasa*, *Purana* and Veda were important subjects of study. The Sankhayana srautasutra, mentioned the *Itihasa* as well as the *Purana* as a veda. In two Grihya sutra also *Itihasa* and *Purana* have been mentioned, which stand for stories and legends. In one of the pali texts, *Itihasa* is called as the fifth veda. Sayana, (1300-1380 A.D), a commentator on Veda, while examining the relationship between *Itihasa* and *Purana*, tried to distinguish one from other which yields no consistent result. We find that by the former he means the Mahabharata and by the later the Brahmanda. They, according to him, form parts of the sacred literature, which consist of the story of either god or men or cosmogony tradition. In fact, the general use of compound word *Itihasa-Purana* indicated the close relation between the two. In the later vedic age, the three family of the Angiras, the Atharvanas and the Bhrigus, merged and the resultant composite family of the Bhrgviangirases successfully carried on the tradition of *Itihasa-Purana*, Akhyanas and Akhyayikas etc.

There is no denying fact that in the later Vedic age, *Itihasa* assume greater importance than *Purana*, however the fact remains that both were equally popular and remains indistinguishably. In the later time, of course some distinction was made between the two. The connotation of *Itihasa* gradually changed; *Itihasa* was often used as a general term as is embrace all the historical and related tradition and the *Purana*.

The question as to which *Itihasa-Purana* or *Itihasa* has been called the fifth Veda in the Sanskrit and Buddhist texts concerned still remains to be answered. K.F Geldner, on the basis of the evidence whatsoever in the ancient Indian literature texts as reasonable concluded that their existed a single word called *Itihasaveda* or *itrihasa Purana*. But he has not spelt out the name of the work. His view have been contradicted by Maurice Winternitz and A.A.Macdonell

and A.B.Keith, according to them, the *Itihasa* Veda is not any particular book but that branches of learning which consist of story, legend etc. They simply state that the *Itihasa-Purana* representing the great body of mythology, legendary history, etc, may roughly classed as fifth Veda. Emil Sieg, while dealing with the ancient Indian *Itihasa* tradition, point out that there existed a collection of *Itihasa* or *Purana* under the title of *Itihasapuranaveda*. He has called the Mahabharata the fifth Veda contending that these grate epic posses all the elements of *Itihasa* and *Purana*. J.Herten has also dealt with the subject but without drawing and positive conclusion. However, the so called fifth Veda is no other that *Itihasa Samhita* or *Purana Samhita* of Vyasa, which have been interchangeably called the *Itihasapurana* and the *PuranaItihasa*. This canirrefutable be probe on the combined testimony of the puranic texts themselves. Here, suffice it to say that ancient traditions preserved in the so called *Itihasa-Purana* about kings of various dynasties, their genealogies and famous deeds etc., are of great historical importance. The Puranic texts deals with various aspects of ancient Indian history, which are the glaring examples of *Itihasa*s. The *Purana* appeared as enlarge forms of the Vedas. That is why the *Itihasa-Purana* has been mentioned in the Vedic and puranic literature as the fifth Veda along with other four Vedas. The *Itihasa-Purana* and the Vedas were closely related and equally important. The *Purana*s were considered relatively more important that the Vedas. For achieving the correct interpretation, explanation and analysis of the data contained in the Vedas, the sound knowledge of the *Itihasa* and *Purana* was essential for the Brahmans as evidenced by the Mahabharatas, the *Purana*s and one of the Smritis. The *Purana*s was one of the main fourteen branches of learing. According to well-established tradition, the learned members of the society regularly studied the *Itihasa* and *Purana*.

Value of *Itihasa-Purana* Tradition

The value of *Itihasa-Purana* tradition is fairly illustrated in some of the Puaranic texts. In some of the Puarana, *Itihasa*, *Purana* and Akhyana have been treated as almost identical. The texts call themselves by all these terms. No clear-cut distinction has been made between them. However, as collective terms *Itihasa* and *Purana* are often mentioned as distinct. They actually became separate from each other much later. The Puranic evidence in this regard is more explicit than the Vedic and Brahmanic ones.

The two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatas, include almost all the elements of historical tradition. The text themselves bespeaks the truth concerned. Valmiki himself calls his Ramayanas a Puratana *Itihasa, w*hose justification lies in the historical data contained in the texts. The Mahabharata is called *Itihasa*, *Purana* and Akhyana. Actually, it embodies several akhyanas, upakhyanas etc. It is also called *Arthasastra* and *Sharmasastra*. It is further said in the text that it is well supported by the Vedic and Puranic evidences. The word *Itihasa* occurs several times in this epic along with *Puravrtta*, akhyana, *Purana*, *katha*, etc., which are all synonymous. According to E.W.Hopkins, the Mahabharats indifferently called the *Itihasa* and *Purana* claims the title of the fifth Veda. The epic account in the present form is based upon that of the *Purana*. He further states that the historical tales embedded in this epic is not wholly without scholastic affinities. The Mahabharat is relatively more important than the Ramayana from the historical point of view. It is no doubt a semi historical work. It is encyclopedic in nature containing a plethora of materials relating to some conceivable aspects of ancient Indian history and culture. F.E Pargiter has correctly observed that "The *Purana*, The Mahabharats and in a minor degree the Ramayana profess to give accounts from tradition about the earliest occurrences. The former two constitute main pillars of the edifice of early Indian historicaltradition. In literature of the later period, names like *Itihasa*, akhyana and *Purana* are by no means restricted to the Mahabharata, Ramayana and the *Purana*s., some Buddhist and Jain works are also based on *Itihasa-Purana* tradition to a considerable extent.

Kautilya had comprehensive idea of History. According to him, *Itihasa* is not a single work but a class of literature consisting of the *Purana*, *Itivritti* (an account of the past event, a narrative or story), *akhyayika* (biographies of kings or princes and important historical personages), *udaharana* (an illustration), the Dharmasastra (law) and the Arthasastra(science of polity or state and government). These were six constituents' elements of history. *Purana* here means Puranas, which, according to him, were most important of all components, parts of *Itihasa*. This description of the *Itihasa* goes well in accord with what we find in one of the Jain *purans* of the ninth century A.D.

The *Itihasa*, *Purana*, Akhyana and *Akhyayika* also received the notices of Katyayana (Second half of fourth Century B.C) and Patanjali as different literary works. Manu also refers to *akhyana*, *Itihasa* and *Purana* (akhyananitihisams ca *Purana*ni) which were learnt and taught. The *itihasa* or

history mentioned in this text, according to some scholars, includes also the two epics. But here it does not refer to any particular book. This is just a traditional way of looking at various form of *Itihasa*. However, works on history embodying ancient traditions, stories, *gatha*, etc. did exist. Amara Simha) 5th or6th Century A.D), in his Amarakosa defines *Itihasa* as *puravrtta* (accounts of past events). The commentator on this work includes the Mahabharats in it. Further *akhyayikas* (a biographical work dealing with historical subjects) has also been referred to therein along with *Purana* characterized with five sections (including dynastic genealogies based on traditions) which it comprises. Rajasekharas (who belonged to the last quarter of the ninth and first quarter of the tenth century A.D) calls the *Itihasa* a Veda. He identifies the Puarana with *Itihasa*. According to him, there are two different kinds of *Itihasa*, viz. *parakriyas* and *Purakalpa*. The former focuses on only one hero such as in the Ramayana and the latter on several heroes such as in the Mahabharats.

The ancient Indian writers do not appear to be consistent in their use in the expression *akhyana*, *Itihasa* and *Purana*, for they sometimes use the term as synonymous and sometimes describe them as various kinds of narratives. In fact, it was not always possible for them to draw any hard and line fast of distinction between them. For a considerable period, they were treated as intertwined or interrelated. They were actually complementary to each other.

The *Itihasa-Purana* tradition finds reflection not only in Vedas, the epics and *Purana* but also in the writings of the Buddhist and Jain scholars. The historical writings in ancient India at least to the end of the Gupta period were broadly based on this tradition. The three legitimate constituents of this tradition were myth, genealogy and historical narratives. In the post-Gupta period, there was no doubt slight departure from the earlier tradition. However, the impact of*Itihasa-Purana* tradition is discernible on the historical literature of that period too. The concept or idea of history started changing to a reasonable extent from the seventh century onwards. The *Itihasa* and *purana* developed as two distinct subject of study. But the older tradition did not completely die down. Even the writings of Kalhana, the best of all ancient historians of India, bear the stamp of the *Itihasa* and *Purana* tradition.

Our knowledge of the most ancient past rests mainly on tradition. The tradition is human testimony concerning the long past, and hence it is not to be discarded simply because it contains discrepancies. Ancient Indian historical

tradition cannot be put aside as wholly unworthy of credence. Its general trustworthiness can be tested by the results of discoveries and excavations. It may be examined and weighed with the aid of all information available to us. The ancient Indian historian have bequeathed to us types of historical works which include dynastic annals, genealogical records, historical biographies, local chronicles, historical narratives, regional histories, etc. the historical sense of ancient Indian writers is eloquently reflected in the works they have left behind.