

A Comparison of Historical sense of Ancient Indians with the Classical World

Dr. Preeti Prabhat,

Asstt. Professor.- History

*Pt. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Government P.G College,
Lucknow.*

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, due to the increasing administrative responsibilities of the British rule in India, its officers felt the need to be familiar with the laws, habits, customs and history of India. To know more about India the Asiatic Society of Bengal was established in 1784. The early colonial historians had their view that India is a country of philosophers but the Indian mind lacked the ability for political and material speculation. These early western historians tried to prove that ancient Indians lacked a sense of history and were accustomed to despotic rule. They wrote with a view to justify colonial rule and thus distorted the historical evidence in the process.

The English word History derived its name from Greek word historia meaning learning .The Sanskrit word Itihasa has been explained in oxford sanskrit English dictionary as It-ha-asa or 'so indeed it was' and 'talk, legend, traditional accounts of former events'. The Arabic word Tarikh or Tawarikh literally meaning dates only conveys the impression of annals and chronicles not history. Historiography indicates a state of culture under the influence of which the historian works. As cultural patterns change the outlook of historians also change. According to Max Muller history provides a comprehensive knowledge of all that has happened in past. There is history in large and history in small, each has its value but their values are different. In every country and in every age the body of history has been shaped by the events of contemporary age which are always different .The events become the theme of historical writings or subject for the historian to deal with. So the most significant aspect in studying the historical tradition of a society is to understand why certain events are regarded as the most relevant and worth recording. Thus, we have to search for how the past saw its past as a parallel study to see how we see the past.

The western scholars have often complained about India's lack of an indigenous tradition of historiography. Alberuni in Tehkik-i-hind in 1030 A.D was the first to remark that " The Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, they were careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings and when they pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale telling". Several other western scholars have given similar views. A.B. Keith writes 'despite the abundance of its literature, history is so miserably represented that in the whole of the great period of Sanskrit literature, there is not one writer who can be seriously regarded as a critical historian'. E. B Cowell also had similar views 'I need hardly say that the history of ancient India is almost exclusively mythic and legendary. The ancient Hindus never possessed any true historical sense'.Several other scholars like E.J Rapson, J.Allan, Wolsely Haig, H. H Dodwell etc. are also of the view that the ancient Indian literature in comparison to European literature is of little value from historical and chronological point of view.

However, it will be wrong to draw a demarcation line between the historical writings in ancient India and Greece and Roman on the other side as all these countries were repositories of historical wisdom. As in ancient India so in ancient Greece or Rome history developed as a branch of literature. In the west also history was an art and not a 'critical science'. They too like the ancient historians of India adopted the literary style of writing. The ancient classical historians called Herodotus, the father of history as a great artist and story teller as he also mixed history with myths and legends. All ancient historians whether of India or of Greece and Rome were more concerned with the artistic presentation of truth rather than the creation of regular and scientific theories. It will be wrong to say that the Greeks first learnt the art of historiography. It will be correct to say that the contemporaneous growth of historical

sense and development of historical writings took place in both the countries. History acquired its meaning and purpose and received treatment in both ancient India and Greece concurrently.

The philosophy of history is based on the view of life which the people of a country in a particular age held. The western society believes in progress through conflict but the Indian culture is based on consensus i.e., ideology of assimilation. In Indian culture, basic values of life are the same but the concept of history changes with change in circumstances. Historians have divergent views whether there are any principles which guide human action or conduct. As cultural pattern changes the outlook of historian also changes but truth does not change. Indian history is based on Humanism and considered people of whole world as members of the same family. It was India's message of Humanism which influenced the civilizations of Persia, Greece and Rome. James Todd had remarked that 'to who expect from a people like the Hindus a species of composition of precisely the same character as the historical works of Greece and Rome commit the very egregious error of overlooking the peculiarities which distinguish the native of India from all other races and their intellectual productions of every kind. Their history like their philosophy, their poetry and their architecture are marked with traits of originality'. The ancient Indian historical works, including the Puranas are of a mixed historical character. The ancient Greek and Roman historians produced only political theories, but the ancient Indian historians touched upon all aspects of history, whether it was social, economic, political, religious or cultural. So both the ancient and classical tradition of historiography has relative value. Romila Thapar has written that Indian historical tradition before seventh century A.D. was not concerned primarily with keeping a record of essential political events, since they were not always believed to be the most relevant by those who were responsible for maintaining the historical tradition. It is perhaps more important to try to understand what was regarded as relevant and why.

German scholar Maurice Winternitz has strongly affirmed the historical sense of ancient Indians and historiography as there are numerous historical writings and accurately dated inscriptions to prove this fact. He further says but the only problem is that Indians in their writings of history never knew how

to keep fact and fiction strictly apart. He further says there is an abundant wealth of historical information in ancient Indian literature which forms a necessary complement to the classical literature. Scholars like A. K. Warder, U.N. Ghoshal, A.D. Pusalker, R.C. Majumdar, R.C. Dutt, R.K. Mookerji etc. have strongly advocated that ancient Indians had a true sense of history and they produced quasi and quasi-historical writings. The concept of time is intimately connected with history. With regard to time Prof. Devahuti that ancient Indians had knowledge of writing history in sequence. History is connected not with absolute truth but relative truth. The relative truth is dynamic and changing. In Indian philosophy of history the cause and result of an event are more important. Recent researches have shown that ancient Indians had their historical consciousness which is exemplified in their genealogical biographies and chronicles, where time was recorded in generations, renal years and eras. R.K. Mookerji has rightly said that "History is not merely political and chronological and is not to individual and datable facts and events. History is more important and interesting as a history of thought. It is a social and cultural history".

In the Indian subcontinent up to 1200 A.D, various categories of sources written in Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil preserving the ancient historical tradition are abundantly present. The Brahmanical Puranas, the Epics, the Buddhist Pali cannon and the Jain Pattavalis contain amid vast masses of religious and social matter, much historical material. The historical biographies, historical chronicles and other historical treatise composed in different parts of India have made a significant contribution to the evolution of historiography in ancient India. Hiuen Tsang mentions the archives, official annals and nilopitu (state-papers) of the Indians. Al-Beruni attests to the existence of similar materials in India. The ancient Indians possessed a corpus of historical information in lithic inscriptions, copper plates and coins unmatched by any other country or civilization in the world. Thus on the basis of available literary and archaeological sources it can be strongly advocated that ancient Indians also like the classical world had a strong sense of writing history. History is to a society what memory is to a man. Just as a man who loses his memory cannot survive long so a society which loses interest in its glorious past becomes decadent.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ✚ J.B. Bury, The ancient Greek historians, Newyork,1909
- ✚ W. H. Walsh, An introduction to philosophy of history, London, 1963
- ✚ R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, London, 1961
- ✚ C.H. Philips, Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, London, 1961
- ✚ D. K. Ganguly, History and Historians in ancient India, Delhi, 1984
- ✚ E. Sreedharan, A Textbook of Historiography, 500 B.C to 200 A.D
- ✚ Romila Thapar, Ancient Indian Social History- Some Interpretations, Delhi, 2004
- ✚ Om Prakash, Chandra Kant Bali,(ed.) Essays on Philosophy and writings of History ,Delhi,1990
- ✚ F. E. Pargiter, The Purana text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age, Oxford, 1913, Ancient Indian historical tradition, London, 1922
- ✚ H.M.Elliot and J. Dowson, The History of India as told by its historians, London,1867-77
- ✚ W. W Hunter, History of British India, Delhi, 1972
- ✚ E. H. Carr, What is History, London, 1972
- ✚ J. Arnold Toynbee, A study of History, New York, 1947
- ✚ M. I .Finley, The use and abuse of history, London, 1975
- ✚ H. C. Hockett, The Critical method in historical research and writing, New York, 1961

Copyright © 2015, Dr. Preeti Prabhat. This is an open access refereed article distributed under the creative common attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.