RECONSTRUCTION OF ANCIENT INDIAN HISTORY*

BY

R. S. SHARMA

I consider it a great honour and privilege to have been asked to speak on the occasion of the forty-eighth anniversary of the death of Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar. I am grateful to Professor Dandekar and his colleagues for having given me this rare opportunity. I would join you in paying my respectful tributes to the memory of a scholar who did so much not only for the revival of ancient Indian learning but also for the reform of Hindu society in the late 19th and the early 20th century. Bhandarkar was not an ivory-tower scholar. His *Collected Works* show that he was keenly aware of the problems of his times, which enabled him to study the past more objectively and intelligently. We all owe a deep debt of gratitude to him, which can be repaid only by sustained work in the field of historical and other studies.

Bhandarkar was one of the earliest Indian scholars who tried to construct ancient Indian history on sound lines, and his example was followed by a host of other scholars. But the discovery of new sources and the appearance of new historical ideas and methods make it imperative that we have a fresh look at our past. The work done in this direction by foreign scholars has not been always satisfactory ; the primary responsibility of reconstructing Indian history is that of Indian historians. In the case of ancient India, during the first century of their work Indian historians gave the main attention to political and dynastic

---

* R. G. Bhandarkar Anniversary Address delivered at the Bhandarkar O, R Institute, on Ṛṣīpañcamī, Saturday, 1st September, 1973.

history. As a reaction to the old line of study, during the last twenty years or so social and economic history has received some attention. But our real need is total history. The chronological and political frame-work of early Indian history has been established, but its non-political content is not only poor but also unrelated to political and chronological aspects. We, therefore, require an integrated study of the different aspects of life as a whole. If we confine ourselves to one or the other branches of history, this purpose will not be served. We have to study each period of our history and the history of each region and the country as a whole and to highlight important developments in relation to time, place and circumstances (*deśa, kāla* and *pātra*).

Our knowledge of ancient Indian history is mostly based on written sources, but these have not been always used critically. Except in the case of political history no serious effort has been made to corre-late diverse sources bearing on a period or a theme, or a geographical region. A good deal of our study of non-political history has been source-wise. This could be justified in relation to the Vedic period for which Vedic literature is our main source unless we take into account the written Iranian sources. But from the age of the Buddha onwards each period of Indian history can claim a number of diverse sources such as Pali, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Chinese, etc., which have not been co-ordinated with one another. Many a source has been studied independently. The tone was set in the late 19th century by E. W. Hopkins, who wrote *Position of the Ruling Class in the Epic.* Later Rhys Davids produced *Buddhist India* based on the study of the Pali sources. We have such books as *Life in the Gṛhyasūtras* by V. M. Apte, *Life in Kalpasūtras* by Ram Gopal, *India as known to Pāṇini* by V. S. Agrawala, *Bhāsa-A Study* by A. D. Pusalker, *India in Kālidāsa* by B. S. Upadhyaya, *Life as depicted in the Jain Canons* by J. C. Jain and similar many other books. *The History of Dharmaśāstra* by P. V. Kane is the best example of such a study. It is a monumental and encyclopaedic compilation which can be put to good use by critical historians.

Several themes in the history of society and polity have been studied, but their treatment ignores the time factor which is so vital to historical studies. In books on polity many authors proceed on the assumption that there had been no changes in the political structure of India from early times to the 12th century A. D. Although a pioneer work, *Hindu Polity* by K. P. Jaiswal suffers from this defect. The same is true of a book on *Position of Women in Hindu Civilzcation* by A. S. Altekar, who however surveys the position of women in chronological order at the end of his book. There could be some justification for such studies on the ground that social and political ideas and institutions

were the products of various schools of thought which continued in the country for a long time. But undoubtedly over long periods of time changes did occur in social and political values and outlook according to time, place and circumstances, and they cannot be ignored in any worthwhile historical study of ancient society and polity.

The interpretation of ancient texts is rendered very difficult on account of their archaic language. The Vedic literature and the Dharmasūtra texts cannot be understood without the medieval glosses. But as is natural in interpreting important terms, commentators projected into ancient texts later ideas and meanings. An important illustration is the interpretation of the term *pañcajanāh* by Yāska in the *Nirukta*. This term from the *Rgveda* was taken by Yāska to mean brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya, śūdra and niṣāda, but as is very well known the four varṇas are mentioned only once in the Puruṣasūkta, which is considered a much later addition to the original *Rg Veda*. Therefore the Rgvedic *pañcajanāh* should be taken in the sense of five tribes and not five varṇas. Such examples can be multiplied in relation to commentaries on the Dharmaśāstras and the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya and so on. In fact the meanings of the words keep on changing through centuries, and the sense in which a word is understood in the third century B. C. may not apply to it in the 12th century A. D. In modern terminology the idiom *īśvara* is universally taken in the sense of god, but in Vedic times and post-Vedic times for a long period *īśvara* meant chief or lord or king. Many of our scholars are caught in the trap, and in a passage from the *Mahābhaṣya* of Patañjali which refers to *īśvara* as the maker of laws. Kane takes this term in the sense of god, although in that context it is the king who is the maker of the laws. It would, therefore, appear that a wrong interpretation put on a word completely distorts the picture. This could be also illustrated by the meaning of such terms as *rāṣṭra* and *rāṣṭrapati*. In the time of the *Rāṣṭrakūṭas*, who ruled over Maharashtra for about two and a half centuries, *rāṣṭra* was an administrative unit, a little larger than a sub-division or *taluka* and smaller than a district, and its administrative head was known as *rāṣṭrapati*. Obviously the powers, functions and obligations associated with the *rāṣṭrapati* in our times cannot be attributed to the *Rāṣṭrakūṭa rāṣṭrapati* who did not symbolize the whole nation. In interpreting ancient texts therefore we have to be very careful about the use of technical terms, for they are crucial to the understanding of the nature of our ancient society and polity.

The one difficulty in utilising ancient texts is lack of firm chronology. Many ancient texts are not homogeneous books; they do not always belong to the authors, periods and places to which they are commonly assigned. Till recently the *Rg Veda*, the *Arthaśāstra* of

Kauṭilya, the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas were thought to be the work of a single author, but now it is established that each one of them consists of several strata, and each stratum is the contribution of a different author at a different time. Any historical study of the *Ṛg Veda* will have to take into account not only its earlier and later portions but also the hymns composed by different families. Modern authors hanker after individal names and prominent identities, but ancient authors completely identified themselves with the existing social order and its values and preferred anonymity. Interpolation is a well-known practice in regard to ancient texts, and it was easier to insert new matter either at the beginning or at the end of a text. That is why the first and the last books of many a text including the *Ṛg Veda*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are later compositions. The monumental work done on the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* has still to be used in a big way for the reconstruction of social, religious and cultural history. The critical edition explodes the myth of one single *Māhābhārata* society, although several dissertations have been written on it. In fact the text covers the period roughly from the 10th century B. C. to about the 4th century A. D. when the number of Ślokas in the *Mahābhārata* finally rose from 24,000 to 100,000. Obviously the stuff regarding social, economic and religious history from the *Sabhāparvan* cannot be considered to be of the same genre as that from the *Śāntiparvan*, which is one of the latest additions to the great epic. Several people including me had suggested that the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya was the work of several hands, and now as a result of computer analysis it has been shown that Parts II and III of the text were written much earlier while the other parts were composed later by different hands.

The problem of stratification needs far more attention in relation to the Purāṇas. A recent study of the *Agni Purāṇa* shows that this was a digest of quotations taken from various earlier sources, and out of the 11,000 ślokas that the *Purāṇa* contains, a considerable portion can be traced to earlier Purāṇas *Kāmandaka Nītisāra*, *Bṛhatsaṁhitā*, etc. In recent times we have at least half a dozen books, each dealing with the cultural history reconstructed on the basis of a single Purāṇa such as *Vāyu Purāṇa*, *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Agni Purāṇa*, etc., but since they ignore the nature of each one of the Purāṇas as a compendium of information, much of the scholarly effort is wasted. It is evident that a *Purāṇa* cannot be historically studied unless we locate the various layers in it.

The identification of various strata in a work cannot be made by a historian single handed, for he has to deal with a variety of sources. Here he badly needs the help of Sanskritists who can reconstruct the original text of a book by applying to it the latest principles of textual

criticism and if necessary computer analysis. In sstablishing the dates
of such texts they can obviously consult historians. The use of certain
key words such as *tāmbūla, dīnāra*, etc. can easily show that the text
was compiled after the beginning of the Christian era when these arti-
cles had come into use in India. It is striking that certain officers
mentioned in the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya are found only in early
medieval inscriptions of Orissa. Therefore a comparison between the
vocabulary and terminology of Sanskrit inscriptions on the one hand
and that of literary texts on the other will not only clarify the meaning
of terms but also help to fix the date of Sanskrit texts.

But the most important discipline which can illumine ancient
texts and can make the history based on written sources fuller and
meaningful is archaeology. Hitherto ancient sites have been selected
for excavations and explorations on the basis of their mention in ancient
texts. This is true of Hastināpura, Pāṭalīputra, Nālandā, etc. Many
places have been excavated with a view to corroborating their accounts
given by Greek and Chinese travellers. The most important develop-
ment in the last 20 years in the field of historical archaeology has been
the search for Aryans. At present as many as eight independent types
of antiquities are attributed to the Aryans with the result that archaeo-
logists have propounded eight independent theories regarding the ear-
liest Aryan settlements in India, and a historian is in a fix whether any
of the theories is true and whether all of them are wrong. All this is
called text-aided archaeology. In other words archaeological excava-
tions are being guided by information culled from literary texts, and
plans for excavating the *Rāmāyaṇa* sites and so on are underway.
Whatever be the motives behind it, during the last twenty years or so
good archaeological work has been done, although they do not find
adequate place in our historical works. We have reached a stage when
we need archaeology-aided texts instead of text-aided archaeology. In
other words ancient texts have to be understood and explained in the
light of archaeological excavations. It is purposeless to reconstruct the
history of a region on the basis of the Purāṇic list of kings for the period
prior to the 6th century B. C. when we know from archaeological exca-
vations that the area was not inhabited before the 6th century B. C. It
is evident that without the advent of iron an area full of jungles and
subject to heavy rainfall could not have been made fit for cultivation,
habitation nnd consequently for large state formations, and archaeology
shows that iron first began to be used in this area from the 7th century
B. C. onwards. But the findings of archaeologists have to be examined
carefully. The Indian archaeological scene has become the paradise for
some who theorize on the basis of slender material. It is only natural
for the the excavator to be obsessed with the importance of his discovery,

but if he considers his finding to be of supreme importance he cannot be allowed to behave like a Vedic seer who elevates his god of prayer to the supreme position. We have to take a synoptic and comparative view of things.

This brings us to tha problem of using insights and methods from other disciplines in the study of ancient Indian history. Proficiency in sources is without doubt the fundamental prerequisite for the study of ancient Indian history, but mere bookish knowledge and compilation of sources will not help us to explain many of the developments. Insights gained from other disciplines and methods adopted by them have to be employed by historians to reconstruct ancient Indian history. We may take the help of geography, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, statistics, etc. No development in political and economic history can be understood without a clear idea of the geographical and ecological factors. We cannot explain why barley or *yava* happens to be the earliest crop cultivated by the Harappa or the Ṛgvedic people unless we bear in mind that barley is a short-season crop which requires little rainfall and can mature very quickly. The general impression that wet areas are very fertile and can sustain dense population has to be modified by bearing in mind that in the initial stage such areas full of thick forests are very difficult to cultivate, and only when metal technology makes some progress settlements and empires can be founded in such areas. This happened in the middle Gangetic basin which is at present the most densely populated part in the country. The study of economic history of a country has to take into account the process of utilization of natural resources, and unless we have a clear idea of the metals, mines and fauna and flora possessed by a region we cannot understand its economic history.

Similarly so many references to *jana, viś, Jñāti,* etc., in early Sanskrit texts cannot be understood without appreciating the nature of tribal society through the study of ethnology and anthropology. Our moral conscience is not shocked by the practice of polygamy prevailing among the princes and priests in ancient times, but because of our attachment to patriarchal society we are shocked by polyandry in the case of Draupadī. But if we care to study something of the tribal practice it would appear that polyandry prevailed among several primitive societies and still obtains in the Himalayan areas. The case of Draupadī, therefore, need not be considered to be an anachronism to be explained away in a roundabout manner.

The insights gained from sociology can be of great use to the study of ancient Indian society. Social laws which operate at a particular stage of technological development can be also applied to ancient

Indian society at this stage. For example although the Hara ppa culturre spread in a wide area, it would be wrong to think of an empire embracing one-third of the Indian sub-continent. It has been calculated that not more than half a million people can be governed by one political authority in a society which is based on pre-iron field agriculture. In any case cities cannot be maintained for long without the knowledge of intensive agriculture and of iron ploughshare and manuring. The Harappans, therefore, could not have formed a very large populated state. Even a rough idea of the size of population lends a new dimension to early social and economic history. If we do something of sociology and demography, we can have a reasonable guess about ancient population. It is true that in ancient times the Mauryas achieved quite a lot and they certainly unified the whole of the country, but what could be the total population of the whole country ? There is a view that in Roman Britain 5 per cent of people were employed in the army. If that hypothesis is applied to the Maurya empire it would appear that the total population of the Maurya empire was 1,20,00,000 for the maximum number of soldiers with which the Mauryas are credited to have conquered the whole country does not exceed 6,00,000.

Similarly comparative philology, which has been in use for the study of Indo-European society from the late 18th century, has been now developed further, and especially the new branch of linguistics called social linguistics can be fruitful for the study of ancient society, Thus if we look into the mode of addresses used in the dialogues of the early Pali texts we can know the relative position of the various segments of people in the age of the Buddha. Such a study has been undertaken by N. G. Wagle. It is well known that in Sanskrit drama women, domestic servants and slaves are made to speak in Prakrit while princes, priests and members of higher castes and high functionaries are made to speak in chaste Sanskrit. If the forms of addresses used by these various people in relation to one another are carefully compiled and studied we will be able to get some idea about the kinship relationship, family relationships, and class relationships.

Finally, it is necessary to draw your attention to the application of statistics to the study of ancient Indian history. In order to identify the mannerisms typical of the style of an author and to establish the various strata of a text on that basis, we have to find the frequency of the favourite words used by the author. In any case the counting of words of particular terms will be always useful. I did so when I wrote an article on *vidatha*. If we want to know whether society has any

matriarchal or patriarchal features it may be necessary to count the words relating to father and mother in a particular text. If the statistical method is used our generalization would be less impressionistic and more realistic.

What has been suggested here may not revolutionize the study of ancient Indian history, but I would like to underline the need for developing a more critical attitude based on the principles of textual criticism towards our sources and using the insights and methods provided by sister disciplines. If we are able to do this there is no doubt that ancient Indian history would become more useful and meaningful.