

CHAPTER ONE

History as a Way of Remembering the Past *Early India*

ROMILA THAPAR

Historical consciousness and even the writing of history can take many forms, corresponding to the contours of a given society and its culture. This is why, today, investigating the notion of history has become an exercise in discovering how the past was recorded and how it can be authenticated, rather than searching for texts that conform to the idea of history as defined in modern times. The latter accounts for the repeated statement that Indian civilization was unique in that it lacked historical writing and, implicitly, a sense of history. This generalization is still taken as axiomatic. I would like to suggest that while in the early period of Indian history there may not have been historical writing in the conventional form familiar to us from European history, there are nevertheless many texts of a different kind that reflect historical consciousness. Even in those early times in India, some of these texts came to be reformulated as historical traditions, some of which gave rise to historical writing.

An understanding of the way in which the past was perceived, recorded, and used affords insights into early societies that kept such records. It is worth investigating what was written, why it was written, and the concerns that occasioned this writing. Not all texts referring to the past were necessarily historical or taken as such. Ascertaining the degree of historicity, that is, whether the event actually happened, is fundamental, but historians have to go further and analyze why certain narratives were projected as historical. Trying to understand the variety of texts that represent the past raises many questions: Why did they take the form that they did, what from the past was of relevance to their authors, and why were particular types of records maintained?¹

Seen from this perspective, there are certain aspects of the study of historical traditions that need enquiry. The widely held view that Indian civilization lacked a sense of history requires re-examination. This is particularly so when we recognize that the historical traditions of diverse cultures – be they Greek or Roman, Arab or Persian, Chinese or Indian, or any other – will inevitably differ. Given the generalization about the absence

of history in pre-Islamic India, the most substantial question relates to the nature of the representation of the past in what can be called the early Indian historical traditions.

The absence of a sense of history is first hinted at, in passing, in the eleventh-century account of northern India by the central Asian scholar Al-Biruni.² History for him was the kind of narrative that his contemporary Firdausi was writing for Iran in the *Shahnameh*, a recital of heroes, rulers, and their narratives. Al-Biruni's primary interests were in astronomy, mathematics, and religion and he mentions the ideas on these subjects discussed in India. He reports on the eras used in India and their calculations of time, but their historical context escapes him. Had his discussants included the scribes at court, or Buddhist scholars, he would have discovered the diverse ways of recording history prevalent in India. He refers to Indians not being too interested in the order of the past, but makes no such judgment on Firdausi, for example, whose epic is a mix of legend and history. It was only a century later that Kalhana wrote the *Rajatarangini*, which, it is generally agreed, is an exceptionally fine historical work, but which was also quoted by colonial scholarship as the sole evidence of historical writing in early India.

The argument from colonial scholars denying history in India was not made in passing. It was to become axiomatic to the Orientalist view of the Indian past, and is still held by some historians, both Indian and others. Derived from European definitions of history, it was also pertinent to the requirements of colonial policy. European scholars, conscious by now of historical literature as a distinct category recording the past, looked for recognizable indigenous histories from Sanskrit texts but could not find them. Indian civilization was therefore defined as ahistorical, sometimes directly so and sometimes hesitantly.³

The Indian past was said to be characterized by what colonial scholars called "Oriental Despotism." This assumed a static society that registered no historical change and therefore had no use for recording the past, since one of the functions of the past was to legitimize changes that took place in the present.⁴ The idea that such a society remained static over millennia did not seem unreal to this scholarship. Change is a nodal point in history when new identities can emerge and the past can be reformulated, so if there is no change there is no need to record the past or even reflect on it. This view underpinned the requirements of colonial policy in a changing relationship between the colonial power and the colony. The colonial power would now write the history of the colony as it saw fit. As Lord Curzon put it, this became the necessary furniture of Empire.

Colonial scholars, therefore, made a considerable effort to discover the past. This was done through the collection of data of all kinds and its systematic organization. The oral tradition of the bards of central India and Rajasthan was recorded by James Tod and Luigi Pio Tessitori, but unfortunately not used by historians. Scripts that could no longer be read were deciphered, such as the *brahmi* scripts deciphered by James Prinsep. Historical monuments were identified, restored, and studied by Alexander Cunningham and others. As an attempt at revealing the sources of the past and organizing them systematically, this effort was impressive. But the interpretation of the data was restricted by the framework of colonial policy, which needed to project the colony as having been a static society dominated by despots.

Recent historical research has questioned these earlier stereotypes. The current argument is that Indian society was far from static and underwent substantial historical changes during its long history.⁵ This view has resulted from two categories of analyses of the past, not entirely unrelated. One set of analyses came from questions drawn from interdisciplinary studies, such as those asked by social anthropologists. They were

examining kinship relations, clan societies, and early political forms, and also the social function of religious belief systems and the organization of institutions linked to various religions. The Buddhist Sangha or monastic system was an important institution in the spread of Buddhism and in the recording of new sects, which were often dissident groups. Such questions forced historians to look beyond the texts.

The other analyses came from attempts to use the Marxist method of historical dialectics to ascertain the way in which Indian society had functioned. Marxist historians rejected the Asiatic mode of production as being divorced from the data on Indian history. Correlations were attempted with the other modes of production that Marx had postulated for European history, but even here there were differences in some cases. The feudal mode received extensive attention and raised a substantial controversy. Even where rejected, it had introduced new dimensions to the study of Indian history, which was now seen not merely as the chronology of rulers but also as indicating the changes in Indian society and its economy. Indian history ceased to be an aspect of Indology and moved toward becoming part of the social sciences. However, these changes in the study of early Indian history were not established until the 1960s and 70s, long after the colonial interpretation had been questioned, but they resulted in a radically different view of the Indian past. Change, among other factors, led to the process of reformulating the representation of the past, and this created or modified historical traditions.

The historiography that is most frequently taken as the measure of historical writing is the Judaeo-Christian. This has a clear teleology narrating the beginning and end of humankind, from the Garden of Eden to Judgment Day. Time is seen largely as linear. However, there are other historiographies where this progression is not so evident: the Greco-Roman, the Chinese, and the Indian. Notions of recording and understanding the past were different in India, as compared to these other societies. This may be part of the reason for their not being recognized. Their recognition today derives from our current understanding of history itself having changed and the realization that its record may vary in different societies.

I would like to support my argument by considering why there was an inability to recognize historical traditions among the sources from premodern periods recording the Indian past. They were evidently different from the European. Historicity of person and event and the evidence for this, as well as their explanations, were not the same.

There were various approaches to history and historicity. Its authenticity was not a matter of great concern to the brahmanical tradition, but that there was a recorded past was significant. The Buddhist and the Jaina traditions, however, insisted on the historicity of their two teachers, the Buddha and Mahavira (also known as the Jina), as well as the history of their sectarian organizations, the Sanghas. This established historicity as an essential component of their view of the past. In the first millennium AD the brahmanical tradition also came to accept its importance, presumably recognizing the usefulness of a backing from history when claiming to legitimize power and ideology.

As regards sources, in earlier times neither the Greeks, the Chinese, nor the Indians distinguished between primary and secondary sources, nor were these put to any rigorous test of reliability. This accounts for the mixture of fact and fiction in Herodotus, among others. He was a controversial writer even in his own times, when some criticized him for accepting narratives of events and persons without verifying them.

In Sanskrit sources, the term used for a tradition pertaining to the past was *itihasa-purana*. *Itihasa* literally means “thus indeed it was,” and *purana* “that which is ancient.” Texts taken as *itihasa* could be of various kinds: from those that referred to the past in a

seemingly authentic fashion but laced the reference with attractive fantasy, to others that briefly gave the bare bones of an official record of events.

Essential to historical traditions is the shape and accounting of time, which allows a distinction to be made between the past and the present. The argument for the lack of a sense of history in India has been tied to the erroneous idea that India had only a cyclic concept of time.⁶ The cycle is described in the theory of the *mahayuga*, the great age, incorporating the four *yugas* or ages of time. The *mahayuga* was divided into four cyclic ages whose length declined according to geometrical progression. They also registered a decline in *dharmā* or righteousness. The first was the Kritayuga of 4,800 years, the second was the Tretayuga of 3,600 years, the third was the Dvaparayuga of 2,400 years, and the fourth, which is the present age, is the Kaliyuga of 1,200 years. These were divine years totaling 12,000 and had to be multiplied by 360 to convert them to human years. The length of the *mahayuga* was therefore 4,320,000 human years. The attempt to make the scheme conform to a mathematical pattern is of interest, particularly as the figures often tally with numbers in Mesopotamian cosmologies. Ideas and figures seem to have circulated in a broad area that comprised West and South Asia. The Indian scheme did not, however, pick up the Greek notion of associating the ages with metals – gold, silver, bronze, and iron. The decline in *dharmā* makes the present into one when the norms of society are turned upside-down.

The end of the cycle witnessed either a cataclysmic collapse of the universe, or alternately the arrival of the savior-figure of Kalkin, the final incarnation of Vishnu, who would save the universe and inaugurate a new *mahayuga* with a fresh Kritayuga. It was therefore argued that cyclic time inhibited the writing of history since events were repeated in each *mahayuga*. However, what was overlooked was that in each of the four cycles there was a marked change that resulted in fundamental alterations of social functioning and a different sequence of events. Therefore this could hardly be called a static society. This concept of time dates approximately to the turn of the Christian era and the early centuries AD. It is set out in the epic *Mahabharata*, in some *Puranas*, and is referred to in Manu's *Dharmashastra*.

It was argued that linear time, essential to history, was lacking in this theory. However, linear time in India is often parallel to, or intersects with, cyclic time. It is central, for example, to the extensive incorporation of genealogies into texts on the past. These are tellingly referred to as *vamsha*, bamboo. This was a visual form of a node and a stem symbolizing generations and descent. Regnal years were given alongside the dynastic lists. Royal inscriptions recording grants to persons came to be precisely dated. This was particularly necessary since the grant of land had to be at an auspicious moment in order for the king to be able to claim merit for making the grant. Furthermore, the shift in astronomy from the lunar to the solar calendar also had an impact on time reckoning. This made chronology more precise and introduced calculations in eras, the *samvat*. Precise chronology was essential to the authenticity of documents, especially those recording donations along with dues and obligations. It came to be widely used in historical records.

A sharp dichotomy between linear and cyclic time is not feasible because some elements of each are often parallel, although pertaining to different functions. Cyclic time is often viewed as cosmological time, whereas time measured in human terms is linear, with successive generations and individual chronologies. The present cycle – the Kaliyuga – is not a repetition of the past, although it was once described as such. Each cycle gets shorter and records change. It may have been thought that the entire great

cycle could be repeated, but given that each was expected to last 4,320,000 years, a repetition on this scale would in any case annul historical reckoning. Whatever may have been the metaphorical meaning of the *mahayuga*, it did not erode historical consciousness. If anything, the differences between the four ages, marked by major events such as the *Mahabharata* war, heightened the centrality of the presumed historical difference between each. Where cyclic time takes a spiral form, bypassing the starting point of the cycle, if the spiral is sufficiently stretched it can become almost linear. These variations are present in Indian texts. They suggest what might be called an almost heterogeneous concept of time, which could be linear, spiral, or cyclic in form.

Cyclic time and linear time were used differently. The former referred to the cosmological dimension and its space was the universe. Linear time was tied to human activity within the spatial framework of a kingdom or of a limited part of the cosmos such as Bharatavarsha – the Indian continent. In this sense, linear time can be seen as a segment of the arc of cyclic cosmic time. Points of time could be recorded in either of the two patterns or in their intersection. The latter occurs in some inscriptions, such as the Aihole inscription of Pulakeshin II, the Chalukya king of the Deccan dated to AD 634.⁷ The inscription gives the date in the Shaka era of AD 78 as well as in its equivalent in the Kaliyuga era of 3102 BC. This is a deliberate attempt to use both systems.

The embedded tradition seems to be more attuned to texts that refer to cyclic time, such as the statement in the *Mahabharata* that the war brought the Dvaparayuga to an end and the termination of the war inaugurated the Kaliyuga. The use of linear time in these texts takes the form, for instance, of narrating the lineages of the clans and heroes. Eras and their various systems of calendars come into use in the later texts of what I have called the externalized tradition. Linear time is therefore not absent in the embedded sources but becomes more evident in the later ones.

Turning to what I have defined as the historical traditions of early India, I would like to suggest that there are three distinctly different historiographies, each of which treats the past in diverse ways. Today, when we look for historical traditions we give priority to the Puranic tradition based on the various *Puranas* as texts. This has been the conventional view of those who make at least a small concession to there being a historical tradition. The *Puranas* are religious sectarian texts of the first millennium AD, although they claim roots in the Vedic texts. Each is dedicated to the belief and ritual of a particular deity of the Hindu pantheon. There are therefore many *Puranas*. There is a section in some texts called the *vamsha-anu-charita*, listing genealogical and dynastic succession. This is almost an add-on, since it is in most cases not an integral part of the text. Placing it in a *Purana* gave the data status and continuity. It is thought that the data was initially composed by bards and then taken over by *brahmanas*, presumably when they recognized that controlling the representation of the past gave them added authority.

The second tradition, often called the Shramanic tradition, draws from the Buddhist, Jaina, and other such ideologies. These evolved from an opposition to Vedic Brahmanism. They refuted the *Vedas* as divinely sanctioned texts and denied the existence of deity and of the soul. Most importantly, they argued that the laws and institutions of society were created to suit human needs and were not the creation of deities. This is clearly underlined in the contractual theory that narrates the origins of government and the constitution of laws relating to family relationships and property rights. The ideological underlining of these ideas would therefore be different from that of the brahmanical texts. This is reflected in the choice and representation of events and personalities from the past. Alternate positions are sometimes reflected in contradictory representations.

History can be embedded in Buddhist and Jaina canonical literature, or can be part of the chronicles of monasteries. The authors of such histories were frequently monks or Buddhist and Jaina scholars.

The third tradition was that of the bards, narrating events about heroes and clans in the form of ballads and epic fragments.⁸ This was initially an oral tradition which was taken over and formalized by the *brahmanas* and other literati when they realized that controlling narratives about the past could enhance their authority. The bardic tradition claims a greater derivation from memory than the other two, and therefore tends to be treated as a substratum source of history. It has survived in the long epic poems on medieval heroes and rulers. These compositions of a later period are in the regional languages rather than in the Sanskrit and Prakrit of earlier times. This sometimes resulted from, or coincided with, the use of these languages in the royal court. It forms a substratum source of recording a version of the past.

In each of these three historical traditions, historical consciousness takes two forms. The earlier is an embedded form, in which information on the past, which indicates how the past is viewed, is provided. It also recalls earlier forms of society, such as clan societies prior to the rise of kingdoms and the prevalence of caste. Such information is integrated into texts, which may be ritual texts such as the *Rigveda*. Or it may be part of epics, which are then converted into texts associated with ritual and sectarian belief, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The other form of historical consciousness is what I have called the externalized form. This consisted of new genres of writing, specifically for a historical purpose, which became common after the mid-first millennium AD. Their focus is on persons and events of the past and they occur in the literature of every region. The historical imprint consists in either reformulating sections of the existing texts from a different historical perspective or else writing about the past in new literary genres. Alternatively, they sometimes reuse historical objects, frequently by inscribing contemporary inscriptions on surfaces that carry an inscription from the past.

The first of these three historiographies was the Puranic tradition. This has its origins in hymns embedded in ritual texts, such as the *dana-stutis*, or hymns in praise of the gift-giving hero, and these hymns are included in the *Rigveda* of the late second millennium BC, although the ritual functions of these particular hymns are minimal. Many are about contemporary heroes, the chiefs of clans, who are applauded for successful raids and their consequent generosity in giving gifts to the composers of the hymns celebrating their heroism. Association with the sacrificial ritual perhaps gave these hymns greater credence, and being included in ritual texts ensured some continuity. The poets rightly claim that they have immortalized the heroes, for we know of them today only because of these poems.

Heroic acts are enlarged in the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, composed in their present form probably in the late first millennium BC, but added to until the early centuries AD. Single raids give way to formal battles. A distinction between the two is hinted at. The *Mahabharata* is referred to as an *itihasa*, a narrative of past events believed to have happened. The *Ramayana* is described as a *kavya*, or even the *adi-kavya*, literally the first poem, whereas *kavya* is used for many texts. The conflict of clans – supposedly drawing in all the known clans with the dramatic ending of clan society in the first case – is different from the conflict between the kingdom and clan society (disguised as demons) in the second. The epicenter of each epic is in a different part of the Ganges plain. The epic could be used in various ways: to legitimize the status of marginal clans and to normalize unfamiliar social customs, such as fraternal polyandry, by making them

a crucial feature of the narrative. The central narrative is about the confrontation between clans, and the eventual war draws in virtually all the known clans and marks their termination.⁹ The war is therefore a time marker. It differentiates the political system of clans based on kin relations from that where power is claimed through kingdoms registering state systems. The fulsome endorsement of kingship in the late sections of the *Mahabharata* is symbolically the funeral oration for clan society and chiefships.

In the other epic, the *Ramayana*, the confrontation between clan society and kingship is sharper. The conflict is between the newly emerging kingdom at Ayodhya and the clan-based society of Lanka which tends not to conform to the norms of a kingdom.¹⁰ The author shows his contempt for clan society by depicting the clans-people as demons, the *rakshasas*. This imagery is frequently used in Sanskrit literature for those regarded as outside the social pale, people without caste identities or observing unfamiliar social customs. Sources are again ambiguous in this epic. The author, Valmiki, drew from a vast floating oral tradition, probably maintained by bards. The conversion of the hero Rama into an incarnation of the deity Vishnu was almost certainly due to a later revision of the text by *brahmanas* of the Vaishnava sect, worshipping Vishnu.

Embedded history by its very nature does not ensure the historicity of event and person. The authors evoke the past and its ambience, looking back at it nostalgically. Such an evocation is common to all epic compositions and is even more effective through oral performance. Epics may be seen as repositories of historical consciousness but not necessarily as histories recording events. Epic material was reformulated into a narrative of the past in later texts, such as the *Puranas*. The section on succession known as the *vamshānu-charita*, in the *Vishnu Purana* for example, narrates at length the descent of heroes and lineages, prior to the establishing of dynasties. Subsequently there is a list of dynasties from about the fifth century BC to the fourth century AD.¹¹

These succession lists date to the early centuries AD and effectively cease with the Gupta period in the fourth century AD. This was essentially a historical tradition not as we know it now but in what might be called a genealogical mode of thinking. It became a data-bank for those in later times wishing to latch themselves onto a lineage and thereby claim high status, which many did. Genealogical descent was not to be counted literally, generation by generation, nor to be interpreted as racial identities as has been done by some modern historians.

Subsequent to the narration of lineages and clans came lists of dynasties and their individual rulers, sometimes accompanied by regnal years. This section on dynastic lists is written in the future tense, presumably to underline its difference from the earlier section. The point at which the prophecy stops gives us the date of composition, which is the mid-first millennium AD. These are largely historically attested dynasties beginning in the sixth century BC and continuing to the fourth century AD. They mention the known dynasties, the Shishunaga, Nanda, Maurya, Shunga, Andhra, Gupta, and others, written from a North Indian perspective. The lists are reasonably accurate judging by evidence about them from other sources, such as inscriptions. Another indicator of the transition from clan to kingdom was that lineage was no longer as important as the caste of the dynasties, which is mentioned even if it is low.

The watershed between the embedded and externalized traditions dates to the mid-first millennium AD. There is a difference between texts where historical traditions are less visible and those that are specifically intended as historical. This is made apparent in various new genres of writing. Insisting on the historicity of person and event, they are a departure from earlier traditions. This may have been prompted by the alternate

perspective on the past adopted by the Buddhist and Jaina traditions, which were more historically oriented and were writing their own version of history, different from that of the *Puranas*.

That the perceptions were predictably different in Buddhist and Jaina writings is also underlined by these traditions being regarded as heterodox by the *brahmana* authors of the Puranic texts. This was not limited to their choice of what to record being different, but also because they sometimes contested the representations from *brahmana* authorship. For example, the earliest Jaina version of the story of Rama was Vimalasuri's *Paumachariyam*, from around the third century AD.¹² Not only did it contradict the earlier epic in accusing it of fantasy and exaggeration, as for example in its depiction of clan society as demons, but it also insisted that its version was historically accurate, thus making a strong claim to historicity. A political dialogue is implied in these contradictions. This approach to the past continues into later medieval times in the Jaina chronicles known as the *prabandhas* and the biographies of kings, such as the *Kumarapalacharita*, the biography of the twelfth-century Chalukya king of Gujarat.

Buddhist historical ideas are evident in the Buddhist canon written in Pali, recording the teachings of the Buddha. Even though reconstructed in a later period, attempts are made to situate the Buddha's teaching in specific geographical locations and link them to occasions associated with his life. Furthermore, the context introduces rulers and other respected citizens. The early narratives of the history of Sri Lanka are more deliberately historical. Among the latter were the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, chronicles of the Mahavihara monastery, written in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, and continued to later times in the *Chulavamsa*.¹³ They begin their narrative with the earliest kingdoms of northern India, thus providing the historical context to the life and teachings of the Buddha. They include sub-continental history until the end of the Mauryan Empire in the second century BC. The Indian link was necessary to the history of the arrival of Buddhism on the island, said to have been brought by the son of Ashoka, the Mauryan emperor.

These chronicles have a different focus when compared to the Puranic tradition. For example, Ashoka is a mere name in the Puranic dynastic lists, but in these chronicles he is a powerful monarch and the most important patron of the Buddhist Sangha or Order. His reign is narrated at length but from a Buddhist perspective. The difference from the *Puranas* is ideological. With the establishment of Buddhism, history is determined by events in relation to the Buddhist Sangha. The interface between political authority and the Buddhist Sangha has no echo in the Puranic perspective but it is confirmed by a large number of inscriptions. From these we know that the Shramanic religions had a wide range of patrons, from royalty to householders and merchants.

These heterodox traditions, as they have been called, of the Buddhists and Jainas have a sharper understanding of the centrality of a historical perspective. The reasons can be many. They were constructed around the teaching and sectarian organization of two historical figures, Mahavira and the Buddha. Since authority did not devolve to the families of these two, it was imperative that the history of the Jaina and Buddhist Sanghas located in the important monasteries be maintained, and more so when each succumbed to sectarian splits. In a sense this was a history of institutions. Literacy for them meant not only repeatedly copying the older Buddhist texts or translating them, but also other kinds of writing. This included a large body of commentaries on the canon, as well as on the monastic chronicles that recorded sectarian activities including dissidence.

Biographies of the founders and the Elders of the Sangha who were historical figures were also being written. Some scholars have described these as hagiographies, but despite the exaggeration in some of them, a core narrative of a life is available, as are also the changing perspectives of those who wrote in different periods. The life of the founder or the propagator of a religion has to be exemplary and has to be legitimized, sometimes by the intervention of the supernatural at critical moments. Such biographies were central to the missionary activities of Buddhist monks when they settled in new areas such as Central or Southeast Asia. The succession of Elders was correlated with reigning kings and thus linked to politics. Records of the properties of the monasteries had also to be maintained. All this was historical material. Dates were calculated from the central date commanding their chronology: in the Jaina tradition the date of the death of Mahavira – generally taken as 527 BC – and in the Buddhist tradition, the date of the *mahaparinirvana*/the death of the Buddha – 486/83 BC. This date has itself recently been questioned as being some decades too early. Nevertheless, the point is that the single, central date is the pivot of the chronology.

The historical aspect of Buddhist texts was governed by heterodox teaching not being confined only to debates among philosophers. The essence of the teaching was to reach out to a wide audience, hence the use of Pali and Prakrit rather than the language of the learned, Sanskrit. What we today call the orthodoxy – Vedic Brahmanism and Puranic Hinduism – regarded the Shramanic sects as non-believers, *nastikas*, as indeed they were since they initially excluded deities. The competition was intense and remained so until the late first millennium AD when the presence of the Shramanic religions was reduced to parts of western and eastern India, and gradually Buddhism declined altogether.

The splitting up of religion into diverse sects was characteristic of Indian religions. Where the teaching devolved from a single historical founder it was necessary to insist that the interpretation of the teaching by the sect concerned was the correct one. This required the evidence of a believed history. Vedic and Puranic sects, in the absence of historical founders, were not as concerned with interpreting doctrine as with propagating their own beliefs and rituals. Therefore history was not so central. The Shramanic religions attempted to retain the overarching religious identity, despite the existence of sects, and an accepted history acted as a binding factor.

All this diverse writing on the past meant that it moved away from embedded forms. It was now expressed in new genres, created from the seventh century AD specifically as historical texts. Although a dialogue between the two traditions – the Puranic and the Shramanic – is not mentioned, there seems to have been a borrowing of narratives, ideas, and form, despite their differences. The usefulness of exploiting a historical form was probably becoming more apparent to all. The new texts were in part a legacy and in part an innovation, and carry traces of mutual influence. They consisted in the main of three categories of texts: the *charitas* or biographies of kings and ministers, the *vamshavalis* or regional chronicles, and on a much larger scale the royal inscriptions, some of which are in effect dynastic annals. These new forms contain information on authorship and chronology, they record events and persons, and they have distinct ideological perspectives – all that goes into the making of historical writing. Earlier records are referred to as sources, and explanations incorporate an element of causality. When political power becomes open to competition, historicity is claimed in the process of legitimizing that power. Modern historians, writing on the period from the seventh century AD, rely heavily on these texts as sources.

The idea of writing biographies of contemporary kings, and referring to historical problems, may have come from the multiple biographies of the Buddha in the early centuries AD. The seventh-century *Harshacharita* was the biography of Harshavardhana of Kanauj, written by Bana Bhatta. There is a tangential hint of a younger son thwarting the accepted norm of primogeniture.¹⁴ The larger narrative was that of the complications in his acquiring sovereignty over the region. A somewhat later eleventh-century biography of the Chalukya king Vikramaditya VI, the *Vikramankadeva-charita* of Bilhana, describes his exploits and conquests, his winning of princesses as wives, and his attaining the peak of power, all in a rather florid style.

The *Ramacharita* of Sandhyakara Nandin, a biography of the twelfth-century Pala king Ramapala, is more historical and narrates his quelling of a revolt by his *samantas*, or feudatories. The composition was a literary *tour de force* since it could be read as the story of the hero/*avatara* Rama as well as of the Pala king. Nevertheless, it provides a glimpse of the politics at the Pala court in eastern India and the handling of rebellious feudatories. This was not an unusual event for those times and the composition would have had an audience in many royal courts. The emphasis on the historical content may also have been due to the author belonging to the caste of scribes, *kayasthas*, rather than being a *brahmana*. This was a caste that frequently controlled the functions of the upper bureaucracy and was therefore in the know regarding state policy. The intention in these biographies was to give the official version justifying the king's action, perhaps as a response to the questioning of the action. New powers claimed by establishing kingship in new areas were being invoked by reference to the past.

The *vamshavali*, literally the path of succession, was a chronicle. The finest example is the twelfth-century *Rajatarangini* of Kalhana, long held to be the only example of historical writing from Indian civilization. The *vamshavali* was the document establishing the legitimacy not just of the dynasties that ruled in a region but also thereby the kingdom itself.¹⁵ Chronicles either could be updated in later centuries or, where they covered a specific period, sequels were written by later authors. Origin myths of dynasties tend to be linked to the Puranic lineages. But there is much on persons and events that approximates historical writing. These chronicles are helpful in tracing the process of state-formation and the establishing of kingdoms. Some of the later chronicles, such as that of Chamba – a Himalayan state, were of the same period as the Buddhist chronicles of the kingdom of Ladakh and the monasteries of Tibet. The second century AD was chronicle-writing time.

The chronicles seem to follow a pattern first set out in the historical section of the *Puranas*: in the *vamsha-anu-charita* section. The first segment of this section narrates the myths of origin, of the formation of the landscape, the settlements, and the legends about ancestors. This is followed by references to early rulers where time and events are not necessarily given in a systematic manner. The next segment is usually the point at which there is a transition to a state and a kingdom, often indicated indirectly by a number of features associated with the formation of a state. The narrative becomes more precise, chronological, and directed toward the activities of the ruler, which can sometimes be corroborated with information from inscriptions. It would seem that those who wrote the chronicle, or updated an earlier chronicle, consulted the inscriptions as one of their sources, among others.

Royal inscriptions sometimes seek precedents from references to earlier events, or earlier inscribed objects are purposefully reused by later rulers. A dramatic example is the pillar erected by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka in the third century BC, carrying his

edicts. The same pillar was used in the fourth century AD for the elaborate eulogy on the Gupta king Samudra Gupta, listing his successful campaigns. A genealogical inscription of the Mughal emperor Jahangir of the seventeenth century AD also found a place on the pillar. These are three inscriptions issued by three different rulers, in three different languages and scripts, and inscribed in three different millennia. Evidently there was a perception of the pillar encapsulating history and the legitimacy that history provides. This was the embodiment of historical consciousness. None could read the script that preceded it but there was an awareness that it carried a message of historical importance, otherwise it would not have been inscribed on a specially cut and polished pillar. In each instance it was the present drawing on the past to legitimize itself.

Most rulers of dynasties of any importance tended to issue inscriptions recording royal activities and events. The format of these inscriptions is fairly closely observed in the major ones. The opening benediction provides a clue to the religious sectarian affiliation of the king. This is followed by the *prashasti*, the eulogy of the ruler, in Sanskrit, which is formulaic although the information differs. The origins of the dynasty and the achievements of the individual rulers of the dynasty to date are given. Genealogies move from desirable links to actual descent. Some statements are rhetorical but some allow of a historical narrative, set for the most part in a precise chronology. Where it is a grant, as most were, the history and identity of the donee is given and the reason for the grant explained. Frequently the grant was of land and the inscription was therefore a legal document and had to carry all the necessary information required of such documents. Earlier records where consulted are mentioned. The names of the scribe and the engraver are mentioned, as is the date of the inscription, as well as its being a grant in perpetuity (if it was), as most were. These texts provide us with indicators of how the system worked. When taken sequentially in order of their issuance by successive kings, such inscriptions are, in effect, dynastic annals. On occasion, later inscriptions are known to use two languages. The Sanskrit section refers to the history of the dynasty and to the rule of the current king, constituting more or less the material that is referred to in the *prashasti*, while the purpose of the inscription is recorded in the regional language, doubtless to assist local administration.

These various forms of historical tradition continued into still later times. The more formal texts were written in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic. Kingdoms with just a local reach used the language of the region. Where the regional language was used more extensively than Sanskrit, as in parts of the peninsula, this became the language of the larger part of the inscription. They drew in turn from a rich inheritance of other historical traditions.

Interestingly, these official versions representing those in political authority were sometimes offset by the versions of those who saw the past from a different perspective, what I have called the perspective of the bardic tradition.¹⁶ This has a long continuity going back to the two major epics, which were in some ways a model for medieval epics. They were often giving voice to those of lesser status and power, until such time as these persons became politically important and had their histories written in inscriptions and chronicles by court poets and officers. The bardic tradition of early times reflected in the epics was gradually appropriated by *brahmana* authors, but this did not necessarily happen to the bardic tradition of medieval times. It survived and on occasion was a counterpart to the official version as recorded by the royal court.

Let me in conclusion state that in drawing out these historiographies, I am not arguing for any indigenous and thereby supposedly authentic interpretations to supersede

those of modern times. My argument is that there is a need for an awareness of the perceptions that the many earlier authors, whose work we use as sources, had of their past. This could provide us with illuminating insights into that past. But we as historians have to enquire as to who wrote the text, when, for what purpose, and whether the purpose was effective. We may then begin to comprehend the different forms in which history was recorded, thereby enriching our understanding of the discipline and the society we are studying.

Notes

- 1 R. Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, Delhi, 1997.
- 2 E. Sachau (trans.), *Alberuni's India*, Delhi, 1964 (rpnt).
- 3 William Jones, On the chronology of the Hindus, *Asiatic Researches*, 1790, 2, 111 ff; R. Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance* (trans.), New York, 1984.
- 4 J. Mill, *The History of British India*, New York, 1968 (rpnt).
- 5 The most impressive and well-researched statements of this are to be found in the writings of D.D. Kosambi, *The Oxford India Kosambi: Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*, Delhi, 2009.
- 6 M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York, 1959; these views are questioned in R. Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History*, Delhi, 2000.
- 7 *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. VI – 1900–01, 1 ff., vs. 33–34.
- 8 D.P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition*, Oxford, 1974; Milton Singer (ed.), *Traditional India*, Chicago, 1959.
- 9 A. Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, Chicago, 2001, 1–131.
- 10 For a study of the epic and the stages of its composition, see J. Brockington, *Righteous Rama*, Delhi, 1984.
- 11 F.E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, London, 1922; F.E. Pargiter, *The Purana Text of the Dynasties of the Kali Age*, Delhi, 1975 (rpnt).
- 12 R.K. Chanda, *A Critical Study of the Paumachariyam*, Muzaffarnagar, 1970.
- 13 H. Oldenberg, *Dipavamsa*, New Delhi, 1992 (rpnt); W. Geiger, *The Mahavamsa*, London, 1964; for the northern Buddhist tradition see J. Strong, *The Legend of King Ashoka*, Princeton, 1983.
- 14 V.S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India*, Bombay, 1966.
- 15 A. Stein, *The Rajatarangini*, Delhi, 1979 (rpnt).
- 16 S. Havale, *The Pradhans of the Upper Narbada Valley*, Bombay, 1946; N. Ziegler, "Mewari historical Chronicles," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1976, 13 (2): 219 ff.

Further Reading

- Bowra, C.M. 1957. *Heroic Poetry*. London.
- Cohn, B. 1987. *An Anthropologist Among Historians and Other Essays*. Delhi.
- Earle, T. (ed.). 1991. *Chiefdoms: Power, Economy and Ideology*. Cambridge.
- Finley, M. 1983. *Politics in the Ancient World*. Cambridge.
- Finnegan, R. 1977. *Oral Poetry*, Cambridge.
- Goody, J. 1968. *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge.
- Guinee, B. 1980. *Histoire et Culture Historique dans l'Occident Médiévale*. Paris.
- Huang, C.C. 2007. The defining characteristics of Chinese historical thinking. *History and Theory* 48: 180–188.
- Lewalski, B.K. 1986. *Renaissance Genres: Essays in Theory, History and Interpretation*. Cambridge, MA.

- Meisami, J.S. 1999. *Persian Historiography to the end of the Twelfth Century*. Edinburgh.
- Momigliano, A. 1990. *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography*. Berkeley.
- Momigliano A. 1993. *The Development of Greek Biography*, rev. edn. Cambridge, MA.
- Rosenthal, F. 1970. *Ibn Khaldun: The Muqaddimah*. Princeton.
- Ruesen, J. 2002. *Western Historical Thinking*, Oxford.
- Southern, R.W. 1970–73. Aspects of the European tradition of historical writing. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 20: 173–96; 21: 159–179; 22: 159–180; 23: 243–263.
- Thapar, R. 1992. *Time as a Metaphor of History*. Delhi.
- Thapar, R. 2013. *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*. Delhi.
- Veyne, P. 1988. *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* Chicago.