

A study of ancient indians texts as means to control the process of administering the past

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1. INTRODUCTION

History is a creative construction of the past in the context of the present. Writing of history is a selective process whereby the historian chooses a number of facts from the memory and administers them with his interpretation to his audience. This is an essentially social process in that history is written with a conscious awareness of the audience. The historian and his audience affect the construction of history. History, thus created, affects the dynamics of society in turn. Those who administer history are aware of this power that history wields and these are the people who may be said to possess 'Historical Consciousness'. The people with 'Historical Consciousness' realise the fact that construction and administration of history can be used for creating a collective identity. This feeling of belonging, of sharing common interests and having common grievances is a pre-requisite for bonding a society. If used in an inverted manner, presentation and management of History can even cause the disintegration of this bond. Thus, the construction and administration of the Past becomes a kind of 'Productive Process' which is highly desirable for anyone who wants to establish and perpetuate his hegemony in a society. Texts, which are the carriers of History assume the role of 'tools' or 'means of production' in this situation. Different members of society use the texts for achieving their various goals. Attempt is made in this paper to undertake

a historical review of the administration of texts by the Indian society as means to achieve the creation or disintegration of a collective identity.

2. HYPOTHESES

The research for this paper was carried out with the help of following hypotheses.

2.1 Ancient Indian past was administered by various interest groups at various times so as to create a collective identity.

2.2 This collective identity was based on different criteria like gender, caste, language, class, religion and nationality.

2.3 Construction and administration of the past had a direct impact on the creation or disintegration of the collective identity.

2.4 A class, that desires to establish and perpetuate its hegemony, seeks to control the process of administering the past .

3. METHODOLOGY

After the initial survey of literature, texts were identified for further study. Certain texts were found to be more frequently quoted, reinterpreted and used, while a number of them were relegated into oblivion. The frequently used texts were short-listed and a representative sample was used in this study. Attempt is made to trace the various ways in which these texts were used for controlling the production and management of history over the centuries of Indian History right into the recent past.

The presentation of history is done not only through literary texts, but also through a number of art forms at various sites in India. A number of these places were personally visited by the researcher. Interviews with the local religious authorities and devotees have contributed a great deal to the author's understanding of the actual effect that the texts thus presented had on the audience.

An attempt is made in this study to collect the data from as many sources as possible. For restrictions on time and space, only representative samples have been studied in depth. The sources are classified as follows:

1. Literary Sources
2. Archaeological Sources
3. Oral Sources

4. COLLECTION OF DATA

Literary sources used for the present study are in English, Sanskrit, Hindi and Marathi. They were consulted from the libraries of the Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune; Jaykar Library, University of Pune; National Library, Calcutta and personal collection of Prof. A.M. Deshpande and Dr. Saroj Deshpande. Four major texts are identified for detailed analysis. They are as follows:

- a. The Vedic Literature that includes the four Vedas, their respective Brahmanas, and Upanishads.
- b. The Mahabharata inclusive of the Bhagavad Gita
- c. The Ramayana
- d. The Manu Smriti

These texts have been interpreted and presented by representatives of various ideologies at different times. The texts of these individuals are included in the literary sources for this study. They are listed in the bibliography.

Archaeological sites were personally visited by the author over the period of 1995-1998. Archaeological sources which depict the interpretations of our basic texts are as follows:-

1. Jagannath Temple, Puri, Orissa.
2. Lingaraja temple, Bhubaneshwar, Orissa.
3. Sun temple, Konark, Orissa.
4. Kanya Kumari temple, Tamil Nadu.
5. Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu
6. Suchindram temple, Kerala.
7. Shraavanabelagola, Karnataka.
8. Halebid and Bellur, Karnataka.
9. Vithoba temple, Pandharpur, Maharashtra.
10. Maha Laxmi Temple, Kolhapur, Maharashtra.
11. Kanif Nath temple, Dive Ghat, Maharashtra.
12. Haridwar, Uttar Pradesh.

Discussions with the local religious authorities and devotees at these temple sites are the oral sources for the present study. Interviews with the concerned individuals were conducted over the period of 1995-98.

5. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

For the sake of convenience, a chronological approach is taken for analysing the data. Examples are grouped together according to the basic texts to which they are related.

5.1 THE VEDAS:

Rig Veda, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda* are the four Vedas, which are the oldest known literary sources of Indian history. They contain a mass of information about the socio-economic, cultural and religious life of the Vedic society. In course of time, the original meaning of the *Vedas* was almost forgotten and their verses were used for being applied in various sacrifices. The sacrifices were conducted by the priestly class of *Brahmans* who moulded the original message of the *Vedas* to suit their economic interests. The books written by the priests describing the execution of sacrifices are called the *Brahmana Granthas*. The *Aitareya Brahmana* of *Rig Veda*, while enumerating the story of *Sunahsepa*, makes a deliberate digression to describe at length how a daughter means poverty and son signifies happiness. Gender discrimination is consciously legitimised here by acquiring the sanction of the *Veda*.

The *Purusa Sukta* from the *Rigveda* is a comparatively later hymn that seeks to explain the social categories of four *Varnas*. It is one of the most widely quoted hymns of the Vedas and thinkers right upto the nineteenth century have written pages after pages in repudiating the *Purusa Sukta*. Its refutations in themselves gave a collective identity to these thinkers as non-believers.

Knowledge contained in the *Vedas* and the rituals according to the Vedic decrees were in the Vedic Sanskrit language. *Buddha*, since he wanted to do away with the unnecessary sacrifices and rituals, had to take a negative cognisance

of the *Vedas* in that, he had to explicitly deny the authority of the *Vedas*. As he wanted to create a new social ethos, he had to deny the legitimacy of the old texts which were the foundation of Brahmanical power.

Vedas and their ideology in general was consciously used by a nineteenth century social reformer in India. He was *Dayanand Saraswati*; the founder of *Arya Samaj*. "Back to the *Vedas*" was the slogan of his society. The simple nature-worship of the Vedic texts was highlighted by *Dayanand*, who claimed that there was a necessity to purge the Hindu religion of the "evils" that had crept into the "Pure" Vedic religion. It was of course, upto him to decide what part had "crept in" the "pure" religion. His presentation of the *Vedas* rendered them flawless and ideal. A collective Hindu identity was sought to be created by painting a glorious picture of the Vedic past. The *Arya Samaj* survives to this day though largely in the management of a number of schools and colleges in Western and north-western India.

Even in the last decade of the twentieth century, we can meet people who do not want to let go of their monopoly of the Vedic Literature. The meaning of the verses of the *Rig Veda* was not known to a Brahmin priest at the *Suchindram* temple in south India. When asked, if he could let the author have a look at the palm-leaf manuscript which was in his possession, he declined on the ground that there was a Vedic injunction on women and non-Brahmins studying the *Vedas*. No amount of argument could persuade him to part with the manuscript. It was an attempt to preserve the status and power from the past by monopolising the texts.

5.2 MAHABHARATA INCLUDING THE BHAGAWAD GITA

Mahabharata, originally was an account of a war between cousins. Its earliest form '*Jaya*' consisted of 8,000 verses only. As these were recited by the royal bards at various sacrificial assemblies, the bards inserted their interpolations in the main text. This, in its second stage of development, came to be known as *Bharata*, which contained 24,000 verses. The third and the last stage witnessed the inclusion of an enormous amount of fables, philosophical discourses and descriptions. This contains 100,000 verses and is called as the *Mahabharata*. The text as it is today betrays a number of attempts to control the administration of the past.

The most striking of them is that, in course of time, the party which seems to have resorted to the largest number of unfair practices, is portrayed as the virtuous one. The contradiction is not even noticed by most of the audience which fails to realise that in an attempt to justify a certain party, the orientation of the story has been completely changed. Since the patron king of the bards is also a character in the epic and is a descendent of the victorious party, it follows that economic considerations of the bards as a class could have initiated the process of changing the orientation of the Mahabharata.

Another striking oddity in the Mahabharata is the character of *Sri Krishna*, who developed into an all powerful god in the medieval Hindu pantheon. One cannot but wonder if the character originally had any standing in the original story at all. However, the *Mahabharata* as it stands today, portrays *Sri Krishna* as an all-god, more powerful than *Indra*, the god of the pastoral Aryans. Stories in *Mahabharata* give clear indications about the rivalry between the worshippers of both the gods. The victory of *Sri Krishna* over *Indra* is indicative of the transition of the economy from pastoral to agricultural and urbanised stage of civilisation. It may be safely said that in an attempt to exemplify the powers of the newly introduced god Krishna, defeat of *Indra* was interpolated into the Mahabharata.

Bhagavad Gita may be by far the most popular of interpolations in the *Mahabharata*. This collection of often clashing ideologies is the most frequently used text for writing commentaries and interpretations. The plurality of ideologies that the *Gita* offers, is the reason for the striking range of interpretations drawn from it.

Sankaracharya, the 9th Century Hindu ideologue believed that renunciation of action is the best way to achieve salvation. Using his awesome rhetoric, he has explained in favour of renunciation, even those verses of the *Gita* where *Krishna* is instigating *Arjuna* to wake up and execute his destined duty. The text was boldly interpreted by Sankaracharya to acquire justification for his argument.

19th Century India witnessed an intellectual renaissance, whereby the intellectuals fought to construct a collective national identity of the Indians. A bond had to be rediscovered for this purpose, with which millions of Indians could identify themselves. *Gita* provided the answer. It had the legitimacy of being the word of God. It could be put to use for inculcating a certain confidence in the minds of the Indians who were intellectually terrorised by

the universality of the Western ideology. As a result, many of 19th Century Indian intellectuals offered their interpretations of the *Gita*.

Lokamanya Tilak was one of the foremost extremist leaders of the Indian National Congress. His *Magnum Opus* is *Gita Rahasya*, a patiently researched book that significantly argues that the essence of the message of *Gita* is that everyone should perform his duty unhesitatingly and he must act accordingly. *Tilak* wrote this book while he was imprisoned by the British government for writing editorials that were intended to spread discontent against the British govt. He overcame the hurdle of censorship by overtly interpreting an innocuous ancient text. In reality, however, the interpretation was meant to remove the fear of oppression from the public mind. He explained that lord Himself has professed that the freedom of mind is the real freedom and no amount of oppression can snatch away this freedom from anybody. *Gita Rahasya* is one of the most prominent attempts to consolidate the Indian readers into one nation of fearless souls and legitimising the discourse of the freedom movement by substantiating it with the Lord's Song, i.e. Bhagawad Gita.

Innumerable Mahabharata stories have been immortalised by being expressed in some or the other art form. Temples of Mahabalipuram are dedicated to the five Pandava brothers. Experts have suggested that the rendering in art forms of the Aryan deities and concepts signifies acceptance and attempt at furtherance of Aryan culture in the peninsular India.

Places all over India and even in some south-east Asian countries like Indonesia and Thailand boast of their association with the Pandavas in some or the other manner. This association contributes a great deal to the development of the place as a centre of pilgrimage. Economic as well as class considerations of the priests at these places could hold an explanation to the prosperity of these places. *Laxman Zula* of Haridwar can be interesting from this point of view.

5.3 RAMAYANA

Ramayana is the Sanskrit epic which describes the life and times of Prince *Rama*. As against *Mahabharata*, this is a comparatively unified story of Prince *Rama* who did not falter from performing his duties throughout his life. The

epic exemplifies relations in their ideal form. An ideal father, mother, son, brother, wife, teacher, king, subject and even an ideal enemy is found in the *Ramayana*. Countless renderings of the epic in all the Indian languages bear testimony to its popularity in Indian culture.

Kabir, a *Sufi* saint poet of medieval India, was an ardent follower of the syncretic ideology. He made use of the *Ramayana* to show that there was no essential difference in the Hindu and the Muslim religion. Instead of sectarianism, Kabir, sought the creation of a humanitarian identity with the help of the *Ramayana*.

During the medieval period, India witnessed the development of Bhakti movement or the movement that preached devotion to God. Saint poets who advocated a relationship of devotion with God, idolised Rama and Krishna. Their lives were to be studied and emulated; even their names were to be recited if one wanted to attain unity with God. The epics were presented to the public in vernacular languages so as to promote the cult of devotion.

During the Indian National movement, Mahatma Gandhi played the role of the Leader who attracted the Indian masses into the national movement. For this task, he had to convey the ideas of the freedom movement to the people in terms which they could easily follow. He therefore used the term Rama Rajya, i.e. Kingdom of Rama, to describe the ideal state that would come to power when the British rule would end and the Indians would rule their own land. The Mahatma sought to get a sound base and legitimisation for his idea of an ideal state by introducing it in the terminology familiar to the Indian psyche.

More recently, Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama has been a centre of heated arguments, litigations and even communal tension. A shrine in *Ayodhya* is claimed to be the birthplace of Lord *Rama*. A medieval Muslim ruler *Babar*, is reputed to have desecrated the shrine and built a mosque over there. The matter has been highly complicated and delicate since it involves two major religious communities in India. More recently, in December 1992, the alleged structure was demolished. This has further increased the gravity of the issue. When interviewed, the local personnel were least bothered about the truth of the matter. They clearly and unanimously expressed the sentiment that politicians have unnecessarily whipped up the issue and they are making use of the religious texts and holy places for polarisation of voters to this or that party. Thus, texts are exploited for political manoeuvring as well.

5.4 MANU SMRITI

Manu Smriti is a book of laws about the Hindu way of life. Though there are many other *Smritis*, this is one of the most predominant canons of orthodox Hinduism. The book cites laws, customs and usages pertaining to daily activities as well as special occasions. The book supposedly authored by *Manu*, is known for its patriarchal canons partial to males and the upper castes.

For many centuries this lawbook was consulted for administering justice. Some representative statements in the *Manu Smriti* are as follows.

1. Woman does not deserve liberty.
2. Where women are worshipped, gods are pleased.
3. For the same crime, lower the caste of the criminal, higher the punishment.
4. For any crime whatsoever, Brahmins should never be given death sentence.

As a result of the partial attitude of these canonical texts, free and fair justice was hardly ever administered. The book itself is an advocate of divine origin of caste and superiority of Brahmins and males. This text was revered unquestioned for centuries in the Indian subcontinent. Right into the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi and many other leaders had to strive hard for getting the permission of the religious authorities for unrestricted entry for all castes inside the temples like the Vithoba temple, Pandharpur. Prohibition on temple entry for the depressed classes was always justified with the help of the divine creation of Caste theory as cited in the *Manu Smriti*. Even today, certain temples like the Kanif Nath temple, Dive Ghat do not allow entry for women.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the picture has begun to change. Mahatma Fule, an ardent social reformer in the nineteenth century, was an exceptionally conscious person about the rights of man, equality of mankind and oppression of women and the untouchables in India and abroad. He wrote fiery articles and monographs and on the basis of rationality, which was a characteristic feature of the nineteenth century Indian intelligentsia, exposed the partial, false and cunning character of the *Manu Smriti*. He did not stop at criticising the existing culture, but attempted to create an alternate

culture for his fellow beings. He made an attempt to create a collective identity of not only the downtrodden castes, but also of women. Textual criticism was effectively coupled by him with his activities like opening schools for women and the downtrodden classes, organising social gatherings of all caste women, establishing asylum for abused women and their children, and many more at official as well as private level. He criticised the Manu Smriti as a representative text of orthodox Hinduism and used it to exemplify the cunning nature of Brahmins and other dominant classes. *The text was employed for bonding the subaltern classes together against the Brahmin orthodoxy.*

Later in the twentieth century, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar emerged as the national leader of the depressed classes in India. He tried to unify the depressed classes and get their demands fulfilled by using the power of their votes in the Democratic set up. *He started the ritual of burning a copy of the Manu Smriti every year as a reminder of the abolition of caste and other differences.* The evils from the past are thus revenged by the depressed classes every year to this date.

As for the live tradition of dominance of the Manu Smriti, one can meet Brahmin priests even today, anywhere in India who believe, that women are not eligible to recite the hymns from the holy books. The verses of Manu Smriti, cited above, are regularly in usage, as sayings or phrases and people can very well identify with the text which is full of partiality towards males and upper castes. On the opposite side, political parties like Bahujan Samaj Party (Party of the common people) use the word Manuwadi (Adherent of Manu) as if it were an abuse word. *So, the followers as well as critics of the Manu Smriti have made use of the text for creation of separate identities for various classes.*

The priests in Jagannath temple as well as Lingaraja temple in Orissa, do not allow entry to non- Brahmins inside the temple. Personal experience of the author is that unless one is able to establish that he can identify himself with a particular Brahmin clan, he is not allowed to enter the temple. The process of identification here is remarkable in that one has to recite any Sanskrit text. The fact that one can recite a few words from Sanskrit, gives one the credibility of being a Brahmin as far as these temples are concerned. So, the texts can be used for entering restricted areas as well. Something like the passwords, one thinks.

6. CONCLUSIONS

A critical study of the interpretations of literary, archaeological and oral sources supports our hypothesis that a class, which desires to establish and perpetuate its hegemony, seeks to control the process of administering the past. Texts as carriers of the past were extensively used in India so as to control the administration of the past and thereby, to create or disintegrate a collective identity as required. Intellectuals of the pro-establishment as well as the anti-establishment ideology use the same texts for legitimising their ideas. The ancient texts and ideas were especially suited for their purpose, since the lapse in time had rendered them distant, unapproachable and difficult to understand. This created the space for the strikingly wide range of explanations and interpretations. By monopolising the texts, a power over the past was wielded by these intellectuals who moulded the past to suit their present day needs. A direct impact of these efforts was to be seen in the creation or disintegration of a collective identity on the basis of gender, caste, religion or nationality, etc. The construction and administration of the past according to one's requirements has continued right into the twentieth century and shows no signs of diminishing even in the new millennium.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. The Rig Veda.

RESUMO: O texto sagrado dos Vedas tem sido interpretado de modo a servir de instrumento de legitimação do poder de classe na Índia de todos os tempos. Os adversários e concorrentes pela hegemonia na sociedade indiana valem-se do mesmo artifício interpretativo do passado. A subordinação de textos instituidores de identidade a projetos políticos tornou-se regra na Índia contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Índia, dominação, memória, identidade, Vedas.