

Literary Genres and History

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Abstract

For long, precolonial literary/textual sources were thought to be bereft of any historicity. But this view has been questioned, and medieval Indian (regional) textual forms have been shown to be historical sources in their own right (viz. Mangal Kavyas of Bengal and Buranjis of Assam). According to Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam these sources should be located in their own social, economic and political contexts to use these as sources of history. The present article discusses the same.

Keywords: literary, historicity, medieval Indian

Introduction

For long, it was thought that pre-colonial India lacked any sense of history. It clearly emanated from the fact that other than Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, there is not even a single text in Sanskrit which could be called as a historical text per se. Along with different Sanskrit genres, there are Persian court chronicles, which are taken as foreign things as well as, literature in different vernacular languages. But of late there has been a shift, and scholars have started to concede that the seemingly a historical and unhistorical 'mythic' literature of pre-colonial India, certainly contained history as well and for identifying the same, the need is to employ more careful and appropriate techniques of 'reading' them. This essay shall try to look into the shift that has occurred.

Pre-colonial India is a vast sketch of time and different kinds of literature abound in it, consisting of classical Sanskrit ones – the *Agamas*, or scriptures, *sastras* or technical treatises, *itihasa*, or, narratives on the past and finally the *Kavyas*, which is itself include poetry, drama, tales and biography. The Persian court chronicles (mentioned just a while ago), were also there but as said, they were considered 'foreign'. While retaining Arabic, Persian and Turkish conventions, also developed their own body of practices, giving birth to a tradition of their own. Other than this, literature in different vernacular languages are also there especially of the early modern period – like the *Mangal Kavyas* of Bengal, *Buranji* of Assam, and *Bakhori* of Western India.

But largely owing to the journal, academic definition of history as it emerged in the later part of nineteenth century, that is, a clearly rational positivist sense of history, all of these texts were seen to be devoid of any historical value, containing only, fantastic and mythical tales and no 'factual' history as such.

This view has come to be questioned in a very big way and it is in this content that 'Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800, a work by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam becomes important. Rao- Shulman – Subrahmanyam accurately point out that these earlier modes of commemorating the past need

to be seen as well as understood on their own terms in the context of their own milieu, and literary-cultural and political environments. Though they focus specifically on early modern period in South India, their methodology has novel dimensions.

Rao – Shulman – Subrahmanyam question the facile but common assumption that there was no history writing in India before the colonial encounter. They suggest that by employing more careful and appropriate techniques of reading, distinctly historical narratives could be understood, with tracts like being factual, bound by secular causal explanations, informed by an awareness of the credibility of sources, and largely having to do with the life of the state. Such narratives, as per their argument, are embedded within non-historical literary genres like poems, ballads and works within the larger *Itihasa-Purana* tradition. According to them, the contemporary audience was able to make out a clear cut demarcation between the factual and fantastic, through the 'texture' of the narrative, that is, textual markers comprising syntax, lexical choices, metrical devices and the like. Thus, history in pre-colonial South India was indeed not one, but many genres, and is not a matter of "Strict adherence to formal characteristics and types". But one must also remember that a lot depends on the integrity of the relationship between the letter or writer and his audience, breakage of which would lead to confusion.

One can now turn to Kumkum Chatterjee's work, 'The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal', which deals with early modern Bengal, a period which witnessed the consolidation of the Mughal political and cultural order, drawing connection between culture and the production of history writing, more specifically between a Persianized Mughal political court and history writing. The work is one of those attempts which tries to find history in the so-called ahistorical pre-colonial texts, with the help of Rao-Shulman-Subrahmanyam methodology, i.e., understanding, and thus appreciating the text on its own terms without being bound to a strict compartmentalized definition of history.

In the same vein, one can now mention Allison Busch's work, 'Literary Responses to the Mughal Emporium : The Historical Poems of Kesavdas', which is yet another work which underlines the need to understand a text's texture; i.e., a way to make out history by taking note of modes of presentation, shifting voices and the themes that emerge above and beyond the level of particular details, making sense only in terms of an over-arching textual logic.

Busch uses Kesavdas, who was one of the founding figures of Riti tradition, and a court poet in the princely state of Orcha, as her focal point and uses three of his seemingly irrelevant poems to outline the political process of Mughal imperial penetration in the region. Such an interpretative exercise has to be seen in the background of post-colonial studies which no more adheres to the textual definition of history.

It is conceded that "India did not fail to become a historical society: it is a differently historical one."

In his *Ratnatravani*, Kesavdas, has shown Ratnasena Bundela fighting the Mughals to safeguard Bundela sovereignty. But fact wise, he is wrong, as he shows Ratna Singh Bundela to die in another battle in 1582 for Akbar. Busch contends that such dramatic discrepancies made by the same author, though lacking factuality articulate another kind of truth. The author does not any say that Ratnasena was successful but accord him for greater an agency, who himself chooses the fate of dying. His death also be interpreted as an expression of the pain that the Bundela clan felt at being subordinated to the Mughals. Ratnasena death, is thus a metaphor for the death of Orcha sovereignty.

The *Virsimhadevacarita*, a work of two and a half decades later, shows a changed political and literary landscape. The poet's choice of vocabulary and stylistic register makes the changes amply clear. The Mughals are no longer susceptible to the intense offering of the earlier text and the term *Mleccha* is no more applied.

What catches the attention of the reader is the distance that the author maintained from painting black and white pictures of protagonists. Rather one faces a glowing description of Abul Fazl (whom Bir Singh, the author's patron assassinates), but nothing on Bir Singh's glory, this could be seen in different ways. Perhaps Kesavdas was critiquing his patron's politics through poetry, otherwise not possible or perhaps the poet was expressing his deep sadness that Bir Singh himself felt when forced to assassinate Abul Fazl. Thus one comes across almost a modernist manipulation of traditional themes, a literary strategy perfectly designed to bring in the complexities of politics.

The episode of Abul Fazl is assassination is also found in the *Jahangirnama*, the autobiography of Emperor Jahangir, which is not a *carita* in the enhanced *Kavya* mode, but a royal memoir written in a more realist vein. The congruence, thus shows that division between categories like 'history' and literature is not meaningful

For these sections which seem to be unhistorical superfluous addition, Busch suggests that they had original performative meanings for the contemporary audiences, which is lost to us. The grand images conveyed a sense of moral perfection of the kings' domain.

Kesavdas's lost historical poem, the *Jahangirjascandrika*, is on Mughal Emperor Jahangir in the panegyric style. Even in this

case one needs to move beyond documentary history to take into account matters of style, theme, and subtleties, this might open up Kesavdas's perception of his regional convicts' relationship to the Indo-Muslim political establishment, thus opening up issues like regional imperial political relations and Hindu-Muslim cultural dynamics. More interestingly, characterization of Jahangir is done in similar ways as other *Kavya* heroes, who emerges as a perfect case for Hindu kingship. Additionally, these are occasional instances of Perso-Arabic vocabulary which was perhaps a deliberate attempt to produce a 'Marginalizing effect' in the text.

Thus, Busch's work bears testimony to the fact that a so-called 'abstruse' form of medieval poetic practices like the *riti*-tradition could very well provide a mirror to changing political and social milieu, thus poetry's 'functionality' giving way to a 'fatuity' of its own.

Therefore, finally while concluding it can be said that newer dimensions in the methodology of 'reading' pre-colonial texts can go a very long way to understand the time contemporaneous to these texts in newer and fresh ways.

References

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