

Ithihasas: A Strand of Non-Elitist Historiography

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Abstract

The ithihasa is a particular genre of literature in Sanskrit whose two prominent examples include Mahabharata and Ramayana. This article, by trying to examine the origins of the genre, aims to point out at the non-elitist roots of the same. Some important sources analyzed includes the Vedic corpus, Brahmanas, Dharmashastras to oral traditions from the 19th century Punjab, which links the epics themselves or its propagators with the lower stratum of the society. The article tries to filter out the sense of inferiority associated with the authors of the epics, the Sutas and the Kushilavas. The article also points out incest and polyandry as being evidence of the non-Aryan tradition that had survived in the Ithihasas despite the fact that the present day text had been subjected to Brahmanical redactions for centuries.

Keywords: Ithihasa, Caste, Incest, Polyandry, Suta, Kushilava

1. Introduction

Due to its popular etymological linkage with the sanskrit phrase इति ह आस, the word 'Ithihasa' has become synonymous with 'history' in modern languages like Hindi. But, like any other word, it had undergone tumultuous changes throughout the past three millenia. It has witnessed a transition from lower ranks to elite classes across this span of time. Today, those who are often projected as the characteristic icons of Hinduism, for example Krishna by ISKCON or Rama, are figures who appear in the Ithihasas and Puranas, not the Vedas, which enjoy a near-to-scripture status in Brahmanism. It's obvious that Vedic deities like Prajapatis, Angirases, Dyayus and Parjanya have faded from popular imagination. The article tries to analyze not the evolution in itself, completely, but specifically the origins of the Ithihasa genre which had even in its present day form have retained its 'Anarya' nature implicitly!

2. Ithihasa-Purana : Recollections from the Vedic corpus

When the earliest occurrence of the word- that too conjoined with purana, occurs in the Atharva Veda (Macdonell et. al. 1912a:76), it has a really different connotation from its present day meaning. A.V. 15:6:11-12 reads, "after him moved out both the itihāsá and the purāṇá and the gāthās and the nārāçansís. Verily both of the itihāsá and of the purāṇá and of the gāthās and of the nārāçansís doth he become the dear abode who knoweth thus." (Whitney et. al. 1905:780) Historians have already noted that the Atharva Veda is an amalgam of Vedic and non-Vedic cultures and how it shares some similarities with the later sections of the Rg Veda. (Sharma 2005; Doniger 2009) Therefor, the reference to Ithihasa-Purana in the Atharva Veda in itself can suggest the 'Anarya' links of the same. One also has to take into account of the fact that the Ithihasa Puranas are referred together with two other genres-

Gatha and Narashamsis. The latter makes the first appearance in the Rg Veda itself (Macdonell 1912a:224). R.V. 10:85:6 speaks of the trio of Gatha, Narashamsi and Raibhi but despite this being from a later Mandala of the Rg Veda, we have no references here of the Ithihasa or Purana. Though Gatha makes appearance multiple times in the Rg Veda, one has to ponder why the Ithihasa Purana, despite its similarity with the Gatha Narashamsi as suggested by its appearance with the same in the Atharva Veda had been excluded. Even when non-Aryan terms have found a space in the early Vedas, why was Ithihasa-Purana neglected?

The Aitereya Brahmana 7:18 distinctifies the Rg from Gathas saying that the latter is human while the former divine. (Haug 1922:322; Macdonell 1912a:224) The same text identifies Raibhi and Narashamsi on one occasion with few verses from the Atharva Veda- 20:127:4 and 20:127:1-3 respectively (A.B. 6:32. see Haug 1922:293-'94) But this seems an exception as Kathaka Samhita identifies both Gatha and Narashamsi as anrtam – a phrase that seems not to go with the verses of the Vedas. (Macdonell 1912a:445) However, if the Gatha-Narashamsis itself are seen in the heirarchy as lower than the Vedas, the position of Ithihasa-Purana is much lower in the Vedic texts.

3. The 'Brahmanas' on the Ithihisas

The Satapatha Brahmana has some references to Ithihasa which can again hint at the position enjoyed by the text in the Vedic society. S. B. 13:4:3 says of the various texts being recited to different groups of people once the horse is set free during the Ashvamedha yajna. On the eighth day, we read that the Ithihasa is to be read to the people of King Matsya Sammada- the fish and fishermen (Eggeling 1900:368-'69) and on the ninth, Purana is to be read to the birds and birdcatchers who are the people of King Tarkshya Vaipasyata. (ibid. p.369) Tarkshya, which appears as a vehicle in R.V. 1:89:6 is identifies with a bird (Vayasa) in later texts. (Macdonell 1912a:308) S.B. 11:5:7 says that one who learns Rg, Yajur, Sama and the Ithihasa-Purana satisfies the gods with honey, ambrosia, ghee and messes of milk and meat respectively. (Eggeling 1900:100-'01) But at another place (S.B.11:5:6:8), Ithihasa-Purana is linked with Gatha-Narasamsi, Anusasanani, Vidyah and Vakovakyam.

Most scholars have agreed that the Ithihasa-Purana as referred to in the Brahmanas are not the texts which bear their name today. Until before the Asvalayana, the Ithihasa and Purana were not applied to any specific work but mainly to stories of either Gods, men or cosmological stories. (Muller 1860:42) But what I would like to suggest here is that despite being later innovations, the epics have implicitly carried some aspects of the Vedic 'Ithihasa-Purana' in it – as being attributed to have been either composed or spread through non-priestly sections of the society.

4. Vyasa, Valmiki and the Enigma of Caste

It is said that the early Vedic society which mainly sustained itself on "pastoral pursuits and agriculture" may not have hunted extensively. (Macdonell 1912a:173) This could probably explain why the fishermen and birdcatchers were included in the Sudra category when the caste system rigidified in ancient India. In the Vajasaneyi Samhita and Taittiriya Brahmana, the list of victims of the Purushamedha sacrifice has names of people who are not of the upper stratum of the society, and some examples include that of Mrgayu ('hunter'- Macdonell 1912b:172) and Mainala. ('fisherman' – ibid. p.181) Later dharmashastras make their position in the varna system more explicit. Manusmriti 10:48 lists killing of fish and animals in the wilderness the jobs of outcastes, namely Nishadhas of the former and Medas, Andhras, Chunchu and Madgu of the latter - those who are not even within the four fold

Varna system. (Doniger et. al. 1991:241) In 7:47, hunting itself is listed among the vices born of desire. By keeping this in mind, we have to analyze the stories about the authors of the present day epics- Vyasa and Valmiki.

According to Mahabharata (Adiparva ch.63), Vyasa was the son of Satyavati- who was born out of a fish (and due to the fact that she smelled like a fish, was referred to as Matsyagandhi) and the sage Parashara. The king Matsya is said to have been the brother of Satyavati. (see the similarity with the name mentioned in S.B.) Also Vyasa was said to have a terrible appearance, with a “dark visage.. matted locks of copper hue, blazing eyes... grim beard.” (Adiparva ch.106) His dark appearance gave him another epithet, ‘Krishna’. Considering the fact that Satyavati was born to a king and an apsara who was in the form of a fish, even if we consider her to be of the Kshatriya varna, a son begotten to her by a brahmin will be member of an outcaste according to Manu. (M.S.10:10) Vyasa, as the compilers of the Veda-Ithihasa-Puranas, was however, product of a later legend. Never were Vedas considered as a single body of text in the early Vedic times. (Shembavnekar 1946:115-’16) Thus the story of Vyasa as one who had partitioned the primeval Vedic corpus into four may probably have been a later explanation for the name of the character himself. Some of his disciples, Jaimini and Vaishampayana are mentioned in the Vedic corpus. (Shembavnekar 1946:117) Texts like Samavidhana Brahmana and Taittiriya Aranyaka mentions Vyasa Parasarya as a pupil of Vishvaksena (Macdonell 1912b:339), who was a disciple of Narada. (ibid. p. 315) Parasara himself makes an appearance only once in the Rg Veda. (7:18:21) One has to ponder why the son of Sage Parashara, in later accounts was made to be born out of the womb of a fisherwoman. Was it because the genre of Ithihasa-Purana was associated with fishermen and bird-catchers in the Vedic tradition? It would be worthy to point out the similarity of the name ‘Vyasa’ with Vayasa, an epithet of Tarkshya in Khila 2:4:1 (“स्वस्त्ययनं तार्क्ष्यमरिष्टनेमि महद्भूतं वायसै देवतानाम् ।” Sontakke et. al. 1946:927) Tarkshya, as mentioned before, was the king of the birds and bird-catchers to whom the Puranas were recited in S.B. 13.4.3. The similarity might have led to later traditions to identify Vyasa as the author of Puranas.

Coming onto Valmiki, the sources are not in unanimity on the background of the Adikavi. Valmiki Ramayana in itself doesn’t associate its author with outcastes. (Bulcke et. al. 2019:54-55) But the tradition that the sage was at first a dacoit occurs first in the Skandapurana with hints from the Anushasana Parva. (ibid. p. 57) The purana says how a Vyadha – hunter, was reborn in the clan of the sage Valmika and was famous by the name of Valmiki. (Skanda Purana, Vaishnava Khanda, Vaishakhamasa Mahatmya, ch. 21) There are three other stories in the Skanda Purana, about Agnisharmma, Lohajangha and Vaishakha, the latter two being brahmins. All three have, by merit of their penance gained the title ‘Valmiki’. (Bulcke 2014:58) Despite Valmiki being identified with a “Maharshi” (V.R. 1:4:4 “तस्य चिन्तयमानस्य महर्षेर्भावितात्मनः |”), why did traditions develop associating the learned sage with a hunter? It might be because the genre was being identified by the orthodox sections of the Brahmanical society as being linked with such social groups.

Keeping aside religious literature, Valmiki was associated with lower sections of the society even till the 19th century. The ‘Panjab (sic.) Notes and Queries’ of January 1884 mentions a story which says that Valmiki was the sweeper in the heavens while another folk narrative recorded suggests that Valmiki was of the “Badhik” caste. It’s quite interesting to mention that in the former story, the God gives Valmiki as a son as a reward for his service and this son is said to have been born from the “mantra” ‘La Ilah Il Allah’. Another tradition (Temple 1898:112) states how Valmiki gave up his life for the cause of the

Chandalas of Benaras. These traditions could have evolved from the Brahmanical tradition associating Valmiki with the hunters and robbers.

5. Sutas, Kushilava and other non-Aryan elements in the Ithihasas

Apart from the association of the Ithihasa-purana genre with the marginalised in the 'Brahmanas' and the stories associated with the authors of the epics, there are significant non-Aryan elements within the epics. Let us first analyse about the Sutas and Kushilavas, the two groups who are said to have popularized the epics.

The present form of the Mahabharata is said to have been from the story narrated by Sage Ugrashrava, son of Lomaharshana the Suta, to the sages assembled in the Naimisharanya. (Mbh. Adiparva, ch.1) Ugrashrava is also referred to as 'Souti'. The term Suta appears first in the Atharva Veda (3:5:7. - ये राजानो राजकृतः सूता ग्रामण्यश्च ये) as a kingmaker ("Rajakrt" cfr. Macdonell 1912b:462) But from the fact that he is not recognised in the other three Vedas, we may suppose that the Aryans may not have included the Sutas in their list of elites. According to Manu, Suta, along with the Videhan and Chandala, are deemed to be outcastes. (M.S. 10:26.) The Sutas are allotted the job of managing horses and chariots in M.S. 10:45 (सूतानां अश्वसारथ्यं) They are offspring of Pratiloma marriage, born to a Kshatriya father and a Brahmana mother. (M.S.10:11. क्षत्रियाद्विप्रकन्यायां सूतो भवति जातितः) But tradition holds the Souti accountable for the propagation of the Puranas along with Mahabharata. Though the Ithihasa-Purana acquired a prestigious position in the later times, the association of the genre with the Soutis may suggest that they may have been stories of wars, chivalric endeavors of the kings and their battles, which were propounded by the charioteer class who may have been witnesses to the same. The Aryan elite, already familiar with the Vedic 'Ithihasa-Purana' genre as being of lowly origin, might have included the oral traditions passed down by the charioteers to the same genre owing to their authors- Sutas, being considered outcastes.

According to the Ramayana, Valmiki teaches the adikavya to the sons of Sita, Kusha and Lava. But Fr. Kamile Bulcke had rightly suggested that the story of Lava-Kusha had been incorporated so as to help the social mobilisation of the Kushilavas. According to him, the Kushilavas are seen as disciples of Valmiki, lacking a formidable position in the society. (Bulcke 2014:64) Bulcke even tries to explain the social position of the Kushilavas by associating the lowly origins of their preceptor, Valmiki. (ibid.) Yajnavalkya Smriti says that a "Vaidehi female married to an Ambastha male gives birth to a Kusilava. His profession is that of dancing and singing, and going about from country to country" (Vidyarnava 1918:204) According to M.S.11:66, the practicing of Kushilava karma is a minor offence. Arthashastra lists the Kushilavas along with "buffoons", "pimps" and "unchaste women." (Samasastry 1929:141)

The two examples which is being analyzed here as being evidence of the survival of non-Aryan tradition in the 'Ithihas'ic texts are incest and polyandry. One of the earliest forms of the Rama-story available is the Dasaratha Jataka. Though many scholars have argued that the Jataka tradition cannot be older than the Ramakatha and is probably a Buddhist adaptation of the legend, (Bulcke 2014; Keith 1915:323) what may be brought to an analysis is the theme of incest. In the jataka tradition, Sita is the sister of Rama (Fausboll 2014:86) and he later makes her his queen. (ibid. p.90) Incest is a common theme in the Buddhist literature. Jatakas refer to the incestuous origins of the Sakyas and Koliyas, which is representative of the purity of the lineage. (Silk 2008:262-'63) Thapar argues that the incest theme in the Yama-Yami conversation in the Rg Veda is suggestive of "a very early period of Aryan life when there was no conscious taboo on incest" (Thapar 1966:51) But this need not mean that the present day epics came from a period of Aryan history before the compilation of the Vedas, as if they were there, the

Vedic texts would have given hinted upon the tale of Rama and Sita as like that of Urvashi and Pururavas and the Mahabharata war like the Dasharajayuddha. It would not be wrong to think that the incest theme was also a part of the early Rama story, which was later edited out by the Brahmanical redactors. There is, however remnants of the incest theme in the present day text of Valmiki Ramayana. V.R. 2:65:23, which refers to Kousalya as the daughter of the king of Kosala, (“कोसलेन्द्रदुहिता”) may hold some key to this issue. We know that Dasaratha is the king of Kosala. (V.R. 1:5:5,9) Rama is referred to as ‘son of the King of Kosala’ (“कोसलराजसूनु” V.R.4:15:30) With keeping in mind the Dasaratha Jataka, should we assume that in the earliest narratives, Kausalya was the sister of Dasaratha and Rama was following the same practice when he purportedly married his own sister in the buddhist account? Another aspect is polyandry. Though levirate marriage is allowed in the Dharmashastras (M.S. 9:59; Gautama Dharmasutra 28:23), polyandry is strictly forbidden. Aitereya Brahmana 3:23 makes it clear that polyandry is forbidden. (Haug 1922:133) The restriction might be because in a polyandrous union, it will be difficult to determine the father of the child, which plays a very important function in a Patrilineal Aryan society. But surprisingly, the heroes of the Mahabharata engage in a polyandrous union. It seems that the case of Droupathi is not the only case of polyandry in the Ithihasas. Yudhishtira even gives the examples of Jatila, a woman from the clan of Goutama, who was married to seven husbands and another unnamed woman who married ten brothers of the same name Prachetas. (Mbh 1:198:14-15) Mbh. 1:75:4-5 says that Daksha was the son of the ten Prachetas. (a tradition holds that the name of their wife was Marisa, daughter of Kandu – Vishnu Purana 1:15) Now, we have to ask the question of how polyandry was associated with the protagonists of the Mahabharata when it is a practice abhorred by the Brahmanical elites ? The possible explanation would be that the story first evolved among a non-Aryan community which had practiced polyandry.

6. Conclusion

What we call ‘Hinduism’ today is actually a result of syncretism between the Aryan and non-Aryan cultures, which occurred through a span of nearly three millenia. The Ithihasas in itself are examples of strands of the non-Aryan, or even pre-Aryan elements incorporated at some point of history to the mainstream Brahmanical culture. Yet, certain distinctive elements of that long lost traditions have survived to some extent despite the texts being subjected to redactions at various points in history. Understanding the epics from the eyes of the downtrodden may help give these texts a new voice and grandeur.

7. References

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