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**Some Aspects of the Historical Traditions of
India with Special Reference to Tamilnad**

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SOME ASPECTS OF THE HISTORICAL TRADITIONS OF INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO TAMILNAD

It is often said "the Indians had no historical sense, they were more interested in religion and philosophy than in any thing mundane". Most of the European scholars in the 19th and early twentieth centuries held this view. As far back as the 11th century A. D. Alberuni had expressed a similar view. But the scholars who are very familiar with the Indian historical traditions as reflected in literature and epigraphy have refuted this idea.¹

Many scholars point out that it is in Kashmir that one can look for the existence of a historical tradition till the 12th century A. D. They seem to overlook the existence of historical traditions, in some form or other, in the other parts of the Indian Subcontinent. Kalhana the poet-historian of Kashmir and the author of the Kashmir Chronicle the Rajatarangini lived in

the 12th century A. D. The claim for a greater historical sense for Kashmir is mainly based on the Rajatarangini. There is no doubt that Kalhana had a historical sense which perhaps, none of his predecessors had. He used various sources including inscriptions to write the early history of Kashmir. Regarding the qualifications of a historian he says, "He alone is praiseworthy who narrates the past without desire or hatred like a judge"² Such an outlook in writing the past is worthy of note, There cannot be a better impartiality than that of a judge. But one has to be very cautious in evaluating Rajatarangini as a historical document, since the author was a poet bent on writing in the Kavya style. In spite of certain defects in the Rajatarangini as a historical source, it may be taken to symbolize the highwater mark of histori-

cal sense the ancient Indians had. Professor R. C. Majumdar,³ Professor A. L. Basham⁴ and many other eminent historians of India have analysed the historical value of the Rajatarangini.

There are certain references in the Ancient Tamil Classics which were written long before Kalhana and which indicate a somewhat similar historical sense. Marutan Ilanhaakan a poet of the Sangam Age says "I will rather tell the truth and not lie just to eke out an existence."⁵ Again the famous Kaniyan Puungkuntanaar says, "We neither praise the great nor the least despise the downtrodden."⁶ Thiruvalluvar the philosopher-poet of the Tamils says."

"Whatever thing, of whatever kind it be

"Tis wisdom's part in each the very thing to see"⁷

"Though things diverse from diverse sages' lips we learn,

"Tis wisdom's part in each the true thing to discern".⁸

Further, Munaippatiyaar a later poet says "It is the nature of the wise to discern the truth in anything without hatred or desire."⁹ These items cannot be set aside as mere poetic imaginations. They might have had at least some relevance to life. It must be borne in mind that these are found in the literary works of secular nature. It is doubtful, as to whether any of these scholars who praise Kalhana are aware of these and similar references in early Tamil literature.

Prof. A. L. Basham is of the opinion that since Kashmir is a well-defined region and that people with greater historical sense like the Buddhists and the Muslims had profound influence or contacts in that region, it developed a better historical sense than the rest of India.¹⁰ The learned professor's views are applicable to some other parts of Pre-Muslim India also. Further, Rajatarangini was composed (1148-9) long before Islam had become a dominant force in

that region. It has to be noted that Kalhana was an orthodox Bramin. The ancient Hindus didn't lack the historical sense, as is assumed by some scholars. But their ideas of history, at times, varied. Apart from Kashmir, certain other parts of India with well-defined frontiers could also boast of local historical traditions of varying duration. Following the geographer Prof. Spate, Prof. B. Subharao has divided the Indian Sub-Continent into various well-defined regions and explained the causes for the rise of regional nationalism and states in India.¹¹ If one examines his thesis very minutely, he may notice besides, Kashmir, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Central India, Orissa, Assam, Nepal, Western and Central Deccan, Vengi and Tamilnad are also well-defined regions. Some local traditions at least, have survived in these regions for periods of varying duration. Punjab and the Ganges Plain too had their historical traditions but being the core of Northern India,

they were subject to violent changes due to foreign invasions and subsequent domination or disturbances. The Puranas bear testimony to the existence of historical traditions in various parts of India, especially in Magadhe at least from the sixth century B. C. to the fourth century A. D. (till the rise of the Guptas under Candragupta I).

Traditions regarding the military conquests of the kings, their character traits and patronage to religion and culture were preserved in the courts of kings from very early times. The Sutas and Magadhas were engaged in preserving these traditions. We hear of ministers in the ancient Tamilnad, preserving at least some of the local traditions. The preservation of vamsavalis and archives in the courts of kings is known from other sources too. Names of kings hailing from certain dynasties like the Satavahanas who ruled certain parts of India (Deccan) are known from the Puranas and independ-

ently from epigraphy. One of Pancalaksanas of the Puranas is the history of the kings who ruled India in the Kali Age.¹²

The Purana compilers might have had access to the royal records preserved in the courts. Epigraphy itself bears testimony to the existence of historical traditions in some regions.

If one examines the chequered history of the ancient and medieval Tamilnad, he will not fail to notice the existence of historical traditions in this region, as in other parts of India including Kashmir. Some historians of Tamilnad have analysed the historical value of Tamil literature. The most recent analysis is by Prof. K. K. Pillai in two very scholarly articles.¹³ Recent epigraphic researches in Tamilnad, especially by Mr. Irawatham Mahadevan have enhanced the historical value of the Sangam Classics.¹⁴ One has to co-relate, confirm and supplement the evidence from the literary sources with that from epigraphy and other sources. This type of work has yet to be

done for the whole range of the history of Tamilnad from the Sangam Age to British times.

Regional and linguistic nationalism of the Tamils had developed already in the Sangam Age and this is well reflected in such references as Tamilzhakam, Thantamizh, Nattamizh and Cennthamizh.¹⁵ In his preface to the ancient Tamil grammar Tholkappiyam, Panampaaranaar defines the geographical location of the Tamilnad as extending from the Vengkata mountain in the North to the Cape Camorin (in the South). He refers to Tamilnad as, 'the good land where Tamil is spoken'. This regional and linguistic nationalism was in full force in the time of Cilappathikaaram and Manimekalai.¹⁶ This was further reinforced with the development of the Bhakti movement in the Pallava - Pandya period (7-9th century). The Tamil nationalism of the earlier period fused into the Bhakti movement and made it a very dynamic force. This trend conti-

nued further in the subsequent Cola, Pandya and Vijayanagar periods. The regional and linguistic nationalism and continuous sway of the three prominent Tamil dynasties, especially, the Pandyas and the Colas for several centuries (with certain interregnums) might account for the preservation of the dynastic history of these local royal families. This will be further elaborated later.

Some sort of a continuous historical tradition is preserved in the Sangam Classics, with regard to some royal families, one may cite the Pathittuppaththu which has preserved some traditions of the Cera dynasty and the names of three of the kings eulogized in the 7-9th decades are confirmed by the Pukalur inscriptions.¹⁷

Following perhaps the Caritas in Sanskrit like the Harsacarita (7th c.) and the Gaudavaho in Prakrit (8th C.), the poets of the Cola period (10-12th c.) like Narayana-bhattaditya composed

Srirajarajavijayam, Punnkoil Nambi the Viranukavijayam, and Kavikumuda Candra Pandita the Kulottungacolarita.¹⁸ Unfortunately, none of these works have survived. The Kalingkaththupparani and the Muuvarulas of the Cola Age deserve to be mentioned. They contain eulogies of the Cola kings whose ancestry is traced back to the Sangam Age. One may cite, for example the Iraasapaarampariyam found in the Kalingkaththupparani¹⁹ or in the Muuvarulaa Vikkirma Colanulas (1-28), Kuloththungkacolamulas (1-36.) and Iraasaraasanulaa (1-34). These sections contain Vamsavalis²⁰ of the Colas. These Prabandams are closely related to the Sanskrit Prasastis and the Tamil Meykkirttis of the same age. They reflect a similar trend of historical continuity on a dynastic basis, as that of the Colas, besides, the usual encomia on the kings.

Epigraphy in the Tamilnad, as well as, in other parts of India, indicates at least in some ways the

continuity of historical traditions on a regional and dynastic basis. One may refer to the Gupta genealogy being mentioned for about two centuries in some inscriptions.²¹ In the Deccan, the Ihole inscription of Pulakesi II is a Vamsa prasasti of the Calukyas, from the time of the founder of the line to that of Pulakesi II.²² Some of the Eastern Calukya inscriptions of the 11th century refer to the founder of the line Kubya Visnuvardhana (7th c.)

In the Tamilnad the Pukalaur inscriptions of the Ceras of the Sangam Age refer to three generations of kings.²³ The Pallava records of the 4th and 5th centuries also refer to three or more generations of kings. For example, the Sendalur inscription of Kumara-visnu II refers to three of his ancestors.²⁴ But the epigraphic records of the Pallavas of the line of Simhavisuu and those of the contemporary Pandyas refer to a continuous dynastic history of a longer duration. The

Kuram copper plates of Paramesvaravarman,²⁵ the Vayalur copper plates of Rajasimha,²⁶ the Kasakudi and the Velurpala-yam²⁷ plates of Nandivarman²⁸ may be cited as some of the notable examples. These records not only eulogize the contemporary king but his ancestors who hail from one of the Epic heroes, Asvatthaman. The origin of the dynasty is set in the pauranika style. If the king Asokavarma, these records refer to, is the Maurya emperor Asoka, then they certainly contain historical traditions dating from the third century B. C.

A similar trend is seen in some of the contemporary Pandya records. The Velvikkudi Plates of Neduncadaiyan²⁹ or the Larger Sinnamanur plates of Rajasimha³⁰ may be cited, in this connection. The Velvikkudi Plates refer to the Pandya genealogy from the last phase of the Sangam Age (third century A. D.). They refer to the Pandya king Palyakasaalaimuthukudumipperuvazhuti, the Kalabhara domination over

the Tamilnad and the virtual liquidation of the political power of the Tamil kings, the subsequent rise of the Pandyas under Katungkon and successors down to the time of Netuncataiyan (8th c.). Thus, it covers a long period of the history of the Pandya country. As in the Pallava record, the origin of the Pandya kula is set in the pauranika style. Taken together, these records of the Pallavas and the Pandyas clearly prove the existence of a continuous historical tradition in the Tamil land on a regional and dynastic basis.

This trend is reflected in greater magnitude in the long Sanskrit Prasastis of the Imperial Colas of the 11th century A. D. The Tamil Meykirtis of the Cola kings eulogize only the contemporary king, whereas, the Sanskrit Prasastis are, usually, Vamsaprasastis of the Colas treating their history from its legendary beginnings to the Sangam Age and then to the line of Vijayaalaya. For example, they refer to

Perunhatkilhlhi, Karikaalan. Koccengkanaan, Vijayaalaya and his successors to the time of the contemporary king. One may cite, for example, the Anbil Plates of Sundaracola (10th c.)³¹ and the Larger Leyden Plates of Rajaraja I.³² The Sanskrit portion of the latter record runs to 108 lines and contains 48 verses. The Tirunalankadu Plates³³ of his son Rajendra Cola (11th c.) runs to 271 lines and 137 verses. The Karandai plates of the same king are still longer.³⁴ The Sanskrit portion of the Kenyakumari inscription of Virarajendra³⁵ contains 81 verses in 419 lines. Thus, the long prasastis of the Colas, recount the story of the Cola dynasty from early times, covering a period of more than 1000 years.

Such long records' covering a longer period, as found in Tamilnad are rare, even in the whole of India. They bear testimony to the preservation of the dynastic traditions of the Pandyas and especially the Colas. The composers of these pre-

sastis might have had access to the Royal archives, besides the literary sources. The Cera and particularly the Pandya and the Cola dynasties of Tamilnad are some of the dynasties that ruled for a very long time in India. The history of the Colas and the Pandyas dates at least from the sixth century B. C to the 13th and 17th centuries A. D. respectively. Of course, there are gaps in the history of these dynasties. Therefore, what has been said about Kashmir by eminent historians is somewhat, if not equally true of Tamilnad also. This has to be thoroughly worked out in greater detail with reference to the religious, social and cultural traditions of Tamilnad. A comprehensive study of the history of Tamilnad covering all these aspects of continuous traditions will be worthwhile.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sircar, D. C. Indian Epigraphy. Delhi 1965, p. 13-23
- 2 Rajatarangini, 1. 7.
- 3 Phillips, C. H. (Ed.), Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon. Oxford, 1962, pp. 20-25
- 4 Phillips, C. H. (Ed.) Ibid. pp. 56-65
- 5 Putanaannutu. 139
- 6 Putanaannutu, 192
- 7 Thirukkural, 355. English translation given here is that of Rev. Dr. G. U. Pope
- 8 Ibid. 423
- 9 Atanheticoosaram; 22
- 10 Phillips, C. H. (Ed) op. cit. p. 56-65
- 11 Subbarao, B. The Personality of India, Baroda, 1958
- 12 Amarakosa. 1. 5.
- 13 Pillai, K. K. (1) Historical Ideas in Early Tamil Literature—Tamil Culture. Vol. VI, pp. 113-132
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- 16 Sivasamy, V. 'Tamizhum Tamizharum'. Uthayathaarakai, 1-10-71, 8-10-71
- 17 Mahadevan, I. op. cit.
- 18 Iraakava Iyangkaar, M. Saasanaththamizhkkavicaritam Maanaamathurai, 1967, pp. 47-60
- 19 Kalingkaththupparani with the Tamil commentary of S. Pazhanivetpillai, Madras, 1965, vide section 8.
- 20 Muuvarulaa edited by S. Kaliyaanasunthara Iyer, Atayaatu, 1946
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- sastis in India up to the end of the fifth century A. D
Unpublished M. A. dissertation submitted to the
University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, 1969, p. 48.
- 22 E. I. VI, pp. 1-12
- 23 Koataan Cel Irumpotai, Perungkatungko, Katungkon
Ilangatungko of the Pukaluur records are identified
with Celvakkatungko Vazhiyaathan, Perunjeral,
Irumpotai, Ilanjeral Irumpotai of the Pathittuppaththu
(decades 7-9) respectively. Mahadevam I op. cit.
- 24 E. I. VIII, p. 233. Skandavarman, Kumaravisun
I, Buddhavarman
- 25 S. I. I. 1, p. 144 ff
- 26 E. I. XVIII, pp. 145 ff.
- 27 S. I. I. II, pp. 346 ff.
- 28 S. I. I. II, V, p. 517 ff.
- 29 E. I. XVII, pp. 291 ff.
- 30 S. I. I. III, IV, pp. 450 ff.
- 31 E. I. XV, pp. 44-72
- 32 E. I. XXII, pp. 213
- 33 S. I. I. III. III, pp. 383 ff.
- 34 Journal of Oriental Research Madras, XIX, 1950 p. 148
- 35 E. I. ΔVIII, pp. 21-55.