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Literary Sources of Ancient Indian Political History: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *This article explores the evolution of political institutions in Ancient India, with a specific focus on literary sources. It begins by examining the historiographical debates surrounding the value of literary texts in reconstructing India's early political history—a discourse that gained prominence during the colonial period when modern historical writing began in India. Colonial historians such as James Mill and Murray John were largely dismissive of indigenous literary sources, arguing that texts like the Vedas, Smritis, and Puranas were too religious or mythological in nature to be considered reliable historical evidence. In contrast, nationalist historians such as K. P. Jayaswal and Hemchandra Raychaudhuri challenged this view, asserting the historical value of these texts when interpreted critically. The article also addresses the limitations of the available sources, particularly the lack of contemporaneous records prior to Alexander's invasion of India. Most early literary sources are theological or ethical compositions rather than chronological historical narratives. Despite this, they offer important insights into social organization, political ideas, and the institution of kingship in early Indian society. Accordingly, this article examines the political evolution of various ancient dynasties, the rise of monarchy, and the ideological foundations of kingship as reflected in these literary traditions.*

Introduction

D. D. Kosambi said in An Introduction to the Study of Indian History "THE light-hearted sneer "India has had some episodes, but no history "is used to justify lack of study, grasp, intelligence on the part of foreign writers about India's past."[1]. **"**Ancient India has bequeathed to us no historical works, 'History is the one weak spot in Indian literature. It is, in fact, non-existent. The total lack of the historical sense is so characteristic, that the whole course of Sanskrit literature is darkened by the shadow of this defect, suffering as it does from an entire absence of exact chronology.'?[2] This' is especially true of the brahmanic literature, 'for it has been truly said, 'That the Vedic texts, the Samhitas and the Brahmanas, are not books of historical purpose is notorious,' nor do they deal with history?"[3] The renowned historian Elphinstone wrote in 1839[4] that "no date of any public event in Indian history can be determined before the invasion of Alexander, and no connected account of national events can be presented for the period prior to the Muslim conquest."

Although Elphinstone's statement—if taken strictly—still holds true in the sense that no date before Alexander's invasion can be fixed with absolute precision, modern research has significantly weakened the force of this claim. Scholars have now been able to determine many dates from Indian history before Alexander with sufficient accuracy for most purposes. However, when we consider the idea that no connected historical narrative can be presented for the period before the Muslim invasions, and examine it considering current knowledge, the remarkable progress made in recovering India's lost history over the past seventy years becomes clear.[5] Early Indian literature, though largely didactic and mythological in nature, serves as a valuable source for understanding ancient history. While the blending of divine and earthly elements initially makes these texts seem unsuitable for historical study, modern scholars view myths as symbolic narratives reflecting deeper truths. The literature is diverse—ranging from sacred and secular texts to indigenous and foreign accounts—composed in languages like Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Tamil, and spanning genres such as scriptures (āgama), epics (itihāsa), treatises (śāstra), and poetry (kāvya). Due to this complexity, interpreting these sources requires nuanced, interdisciplinary methods. When approached critically, early Indian literature becomes a rich reservoir of historical insight.[6]

Interpretation by Historians

According to Vincent Smith, A historian studying the distant past of any nation must often depend heavily on tradition, especially as preserved in literary sources. It must also be acknowledged that conclusions drawn from such traditional material are less certain than those based on contemporary evidence. In the case of India, with only a few exceptions, no contemporary records exist from before the time of Alexander the Great. However, through careful analysis of documents written much later than the events they describe, it is possible to extract information that can be considered, with reasonable confidence, as tradition passed down from as early as the sixth or possibly even the seventh century B.C.[7] Again smith said the works of ancient Indian writers from which our historical information is derived generally do not claim to be historical accounts; rather, they are mostly religious texts of various kinds. In such compositions, the religious element naturally takes precedence, while secular or worldly matters are given only minor importance. As a result, the details of political history that are occasionally recorded primarily pertain to those regions which were most prominent in the development of Indian religion.[8]. According to Beni Prasad, tracing the development of political institutions or clearly understanding of their functioning is far more difficult. Despite significant advances in Oriental studies over the past century, there is no comprehensive political history of India in the strict sense prior to the sixth century B.C. Even after this period, historical records are marked by significant gaps—some lasting for centuries. The dates of many kings remain uncertain, and it is particularly challenging to establish the chronological boundaries for most Hindu poets, philosophers, grammarians, and writers on law and politics. The fundamental source material for studying India's political institutions is not as plentiful as one might expect, given the country's vast size and long history. Historical writings are scarce. Though numerous texts on law and politics exist, they tend to be theoretical and seldom reveal how institutions operated. Secular and religious literature only provides relevant political insights after thorough and critical examination.[9] According to D.R. Bhandarkar It can rightly be said that no Indian can be considered truly educated unless they know something about the history of their country—particularly its intellectual and spiritual heritage. Although Indian history is vast, one need not be well-versed in the dry or technical aspects of chronology or archaeology. However, there are certain essential aspects of ancient India that one must know—such as whether Indians were ever politically active and whether they made any contribution to political science. Professor Dunning, in his *A History of Political Theories*, wrote that "the Eastern Aryans never freed their politics from the theological and metaphysical environment," and therefore he limited his study to the political thought of the European Aryans. While it can be argued that Prof. Dunning lacked direct knowledge of Indian traditions, unfortunately, this view has also been widely echoed by many Western scholars such as Max Müller and Bloomfield. Max Müller stated that Indians never experienced a sense of nationality and were solely engrossed in religion and philosophy. He believed that India was a country where spiritual life had so overwhelmed the practical faculties of a people that it nearly destroyed the qualities necessary for nation-building. Bloomfield held a similar opinion, stating that from the very beginning, religious institutions in India deeply influenced the character and development of its people, leaving no room for concerns about the state or the progress of the nation. The conclusion drawn from such views was that India never developed a concept of the state and made no contribution to the science of politics. However, this view is no longer entirely valid—especially after the discovery of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. This monumental work clearly proves that the Indian intellect not only engaged in political thought independently, but also developed it as a separate discipline, distinct from religion and philosophy. The very first chapter of the

Arthashastra classifies all branches of knowledge prevalent at the time into four categories—Anvikshiki (philosophy and logic), Trayi (theology), Varta (economics), and Dandaniti (politics). This categorization is strong evidence that, at the time, politics and economics were not subordinate to theology and philosophy.[10]

The earliest known literature of the Indian subcontinent is composed in Sanskrit, one of the oldest languages in the world and a member of the Indo-European language family, which also includes languages like French, German, Latin, and Persian. This early literature is oral in nature and is known as the Vedas, a term derived from the root *vid*, meaning 'to know'; thus, *Veda* translates to 'knowledge'. The Vedas are traditionally considered shruti, meaning 'heard' or 'revealed'. As oral compositions, the Vedas stand as an exceptional example of oral literature preserved with remarkable precision over centuries. The Rigveda is the oldest of the Vedas and contains hymns that reflect early Aryan society in the Sapta Sindhu region. Other Vedic texts like the Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda include ritual instructions and social references, some of which may even predate Rigvedic hymns. Despite their religious focus, these texts are key sources for reconstructing early Indian political and social life due to the absence of contemporary historical documentation.[11] The earliest significant attempt to organize and interpret the growing body of historical knowledge on ancient India was made by *Dr. Vincent Smith*. However, as a careful historian, he chose not to rely on the legendary tales surrounding the period immediately after the famed Mahabharata war the battle between the Kurus and the Pandavas on the banks of the Yamuna. Instead, he began his historical narrative from the middle of the 7th century BCE.[12]

Unfortunately, texts like the Vedas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata have often been viewed merely as religious or literary works, overlooking their political significance. Many works written from a Western perspective failed to grasp the complexities of Indian society. Attempts to locate modern concepts in ancient contexts have led to confusion. The legacy of colonialism, dominance of English-based education, and growing fascination with Western lifestyles have fostered neglect and distrust toward our cultural past.

Evolution of Ancient Indian Political History

The dynastic history of Ancient India, starting from the accession of King Parikshit, who, according to both epic and Puranic tradition, ascended the throne shortly after the Bharata War. Notable scholars such as Weber, Oldenberg, Macdonell, Keith, and Hillebrandt have provided valuable insights into the Parikshit and post-Parikshit eras. Unfortunately, no inscriptions or coins have been discovered so far that can be definitively linked to the period between Parikshit and Bimbisara (the founder of the Magadhan imperial tradition). Although there are some South Indian copperplate records that claim to belong to Janamejaya (Parikshit's son), they have been proven inauthentic. As a result, historians must primarily rely on Indian literary sources for information about this early era, as there are no foreign accounts to support the reconstruction of this period—as there are for the later, post-Bimbisaran phase**.** The Indian literary works useful for reconstructing the history of the post-Parikshit to pre-Bimbisara period with the most important being Brahmanical literature from that age.[13] This includes: The *Atharva Veda*,[14] The *Aitareya*, *Shatapatha*, *Taittiriya Brahmanas*, and The *Brihadaranyaka*, *Chhandogya*, and other *Upanishads.*[15]

The second category includes Brahmanical texts to which no precise date can be confidently assigned, although substantial portions are generally believed, by competent scholars, to have been composed in the post-Bimbisarian period. This category comprises the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*.[16] The *Ramayana*, in its present form, not only mentions Buddha Tathagata explicitly but also refers to conflicts between the Hindus and mixed groups of foreign tribes such as the Yavanas and the Shakas.[17]

As far as the present Mahabharata is concerned, *Hopkins*[18] writes: "Mahabharata indicate that Buddhist supremacy had already declined by that time. These verses refer contemptuously to Buddhist monuments (stupas or 'edukas'), as if they had displaced the temples of the gods."[19] The Adiparva refers to King Asoka who is represented as an incarnation of a Mahasura, and is described as " mahaviryo'paraiitah."[20] The *Puranas*, which include genealogical lists of the kings of the Kali Age, cannot be dated earlier than the 3rd or 4th century A.D., as they refer not only to the Andhra rulers but also to several dynasties that followed them. Considering these facts, it becomes evident that the *epics* the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as well as the *Puranas*, in their extant form, are relatively late compositions. Consequently, they are not ideally suited to serve as primary sources for reconstructing the history of the pre-Bimbisaran era. This limitation is comparable to the use of literary accounts in the *Mahavamsa* or *Asokavadana*, which also pose challenges for reliably establishing the historical narratives of the Mauryan emperors.

Nevertheless, this does not warrant a complete dismissal of the epics and Puranas as historical sources. Much of their content is undeniably ancient and holds significant historical value. As Vincent A. Smith advised caution and critical discernment in interpreting the Sri Lankan chronicles, a similarly cautious and analytical approach must be adopted when engaging with the Sanskrit epics and the Puranic literature.[21]

This class of literature consists of Brahmanical works from the post-Bimbisarian period, to which a definite historical date can be assigned. For example, the *Arthashastra*, attributed to Kautilya, who lived during the Maurya period.[22] The *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya, which may rightly be described as the constitutional manual of the early Mauryan Empire, is one such crucial remnant. It is explicitly based on earlier authorities. Kautilya cites the names of eighteen or nineteen such predecessors. A few others are mentioned in different sources. For example, the *Mālavadārata*, which offers a brief history of Hindu political science, refers to a scholar named *Gaurashiras*. The *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya-Sūtra* names another thinker *Āditya*. This catalogue of political theorists indicates that the study of politics had become an organized discipline centuries before Kautilya's time and that it was already established while the *Kalpa Sūtras* were still being compiled. If we allow for the early composition of these works, the origins of Hindu political literature may be dated as far back as circa 650 BCE.

Treatises on political theory and administrative practice were originally known as *Daṇḍanīti*, or the "Principles of Governance," and *Arthaśāstra*, meaning the "Science of Statecraft." Kautilya defines *Artha* as: "Artha means a territory inhabited by people, that is, land along with its population. The Arthaśāstra is the code that deals with the means (*upāya*) of acquiring and expanding such a territory." *Daṇḍanīti* was the title adopted by *Uśanas* for his work, while *Arthaśāstra* was the title used by *Bṛhaspati*—both of whom authored texts that were widely known and influential during the classical period of Hindu thought. Another extensive treatise or encyclopedic work, attributed to *Prajāpati*, is also mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*. The subject was also known by other titles such as *Rājaśāstra* ("Science for Kings") and *Rājadharma* ("Law for Rulers"). Under the title *Rājadharma*, a significant portion of the *Śānti Parvan* in the *Mahābhārata* is devoted to political philosophy. The *Mahābhārata* draws from older material but was systematically compiled as late as the 5th century CE, though its initial organization likely began around 150 BCE. Considering the references to all these political authorities, we may reasonably date the emergence of Hindu political literature to circa 650 BCE.[23]

The *Mahabhashya* of Patanjali (second century B.C.), among other such works, holds immense historical value. These significant texts serve as firm anchors in the uncertain waters of Indian chronology. While their information about the pre-Bimbisarian age may be less detailed than that found in the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*, the fact that these works were authored by individuals of known historical dates makes their testimony more reliable than that of the Epics and Puranas, whose antiquity and authenticity are often open to doubt.[24]

The fourth class includes the Buddhist* *Suttas*, *Vinaya* texts, and the *Jatakas*. Most of these works can be dated to the period before the Shunga dynasty. They provide a considerable amount of valuable information about the time just before Bimbisara's accession.[25]

The fifth class consists of the works of the Jaina canon, which were committed to writing in A.D. 454 (as noted in *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXII, p. xxxvii; Vol. XLV, p. xli).[26] These texts offer valuable insights into numerous kings who ruled during the pre-Bimbisarian period. However, given their comparatively late composition, the reliability of the information they provide cannot be accepted without reservation.[27]

The political history of India, according to traditional accounts, begins as far back as three thousand years before the Christian era, with the legendary war fought on the banks of the Yamuna between the Kauravas and the Pandavas — an event immortalized in the epic Mahabharata.[28] However, modern historians and critical scholars do not accept such bardic tales as verifiable history. They are compelled to move much further forward in time to find events grounded in verifiable facts. For an event to be historically useful, it must be possible to place it within a definite chronological framework — it must be dateable, even if only approximately. Facts that cannot be tied to a specific time may be valuable to disciplines like ethnology, philology, or archaeology, but they fall outside the scope of formal historical study. Modern research has uncovered countless details about prehistoric India that are scientifically significant, yet the inability to assign exact or approximate dates to these discoveries means they cannot be woven into a coherent historical narrative. The historian's task depends on temporal clarity, and where dating is impossible, the line between prehistory and history remains firmly drawn.[29]

Nature of Kingship in Ancient India

The nature and functioning of Hindu political institutions were significantly shaped by geographical factors, racial traits, social structure, and economic conditions.[30] After society had been divided into ranks and occupations, the most significant factor shaping people's lives, character, and functions became the form and nature of political organization — the system by which order in society was maintained. Among the Hindus, following the typical Asiatic pattern, governance was monarchical and, apart from the domain of religion and its priests, largely absolute. There seems to have been no conception of governance apart from the absolute authority of a single ruler, either among the people or their lawmakers. According to Hindu law, "If the world had no king, it would tremble in fear from every direction; therefore, the ruler of the universe created a king to uphold the system." The immense and unchecked power of the monarch is reflected in the grand language used in sacred texts to describe his status and qualities. The *Manusmriti* (Law of Manu), for instance, proclaims that the king is constituted from the essential elements of the principal guardian deities, thereby elevating him above all other mortals in splendour and authority. Like the sun, he burns both the eyes and hearts of men—no ordinary human can even bear to look upon him. He embodies the forces of fire and air, represents the god of justice (*Dharma*), the spirit of wealth (*Kubera*), the lord of waters (*Varuna*), and the sovereign of the heavens (*Indra*). Even if the king is a mere child, he must never be regarded as a common human being—for he is divinity manifest in human form. When angered, he is like death itself. Anyone who shows hostility toward the king, misguided by ignorance, will certainly perish — for the king will set his mind to that person's ruin without delay. The sheer grandeur and divine attribution surrounding kingship in ancient India granted the monarch an authority almost without parallel — an authority as total and unquestioned as any imperial imagination could conceive.[31] We begin with the Vedic polity and the arrival of the Indo-Aryans in India, which occurred around 1600–1400 B.C.[32] The Rigvedic Indo-Aryan society was patriarchal and followed a monarchical system. Initially, kings were elected by the people, but over time, kingship became hereditary. Two key assemblies — the *Samiti* (general assembly) and the *Sabha* (council of elders) — likely helped in electing and advising the king. The king did not have the authority to levy regular tribute; he was only entitled to receive voluntary gifts and offerings from the people. Since his position was based on election, he could also be deposed if necessary. Despite these limitations, the king's power steadily expanded, largely due to continuous warfare — both with indigenous populations and among the Indo-Aryan tribes themselves. Kings who demonstrated valor and leadership in battle earned growing prestige and influence. This rising status extended not only to the kings but also to their warriors. Over time, these war leaders and their soldiers coalesced into an organized and distinct warrior class, known as the *Rajanyas*, marking the early formation of a hereditary ruling elite.[33] Kingship, which was initially elective, gradually transformed into a hereditary institution. As hereditary monarchy took root, the early Vedic popular assemblies the *Samiti* and *Sabha* began to lose their relevance and significance. In their place emerged new administrative and advisory bodies like the *Rajasabha* (royal court) and the *Mantri Parishad* (council of ministers), which came to play a central role in governance.[34] During the early Vedic period, kingship functioned as a secular role, primarily shaped by practical and worldly concerns. Over time, however, it evolved into a religious institution. The king was no longer seen simply as a political leader, but rather as a figure invested with divine and sacred authority, closely tied to religious duties and beliefs.[35] The idea of Dharma as understood by both the king and the people—was deeply rooted in the belief that one must faithfully carry out duties as prescribed by the eternal sacred laws, especially those found in the Vedas. In response to the growing influence of heterodox religions, the Brahmanical tradition developed a structured ritual code, dividing it into three main categories: Śrauta, Gṛhya, and Dharma Sūtras, collectively known as the Kalpa Sūtras. These texts aimed to safeguard the Vedic religion. Among them, the Dharma Sūtras were the earliest form of legal literature, blending religious, ethical, and secular norms governing public behavior. They offered specific guidelines not only for social life but also for the responsibilities of the king and his administration. These codes represented a form of customary law rooted in religion, and it was this body of law that the king was empowered to enforce. Within this framework, his authority became absolute and unchallenged. This marked a significant shift—introducing a new phase where the king began to exercise independent legal authority, signaling the rise of royal self-assertion.[36] The rise of the Maurya dynasty in the 4th century BCE marked the formation of India's first true historical empire. This development was the natural result of ongoing power struggles among the northern Indian kingdoms. Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the dynasty, is believed to have been inclined toward Jainism, while his grandson Ashoka, under whom the empire reached its greatest strength and territorial expanse, became a committed follower of Buddhism. Ashoka aspired to rule as an ideal monarch. While his vision was influenced by the Brahmanical tradition that emphasized

social order and sacred law, he also understood the practical challenges of governing a diverse society. At the time, Brahmanism dominated legal and social life through the Dharma Sūtras, which reinforced caste hierarchies and Brahmanical authority. However, the presence of Buddhists and Jains, with their different beliefs and practices, posed challenges to a unified administrative system. To address this diversity, religious tolerance became a key policy. It allowed Buddhists and Jains to live according to their own faiths, practices, and social customs, and to be governed by their respective customary and secular laws. This approach not only promoted harmony but also strengthened Ashoka's vision of a morally guided and inclusive state.[37] This concept of ideal kingship was eventually embraced by Brahmanism as well. It is clearly evident in Kautilya's Arthashastra, where he emphasizes that the king must guide his subjects through discipline and education (*vidya-vinito raja prajanam vinaye ratah*), act as the promoter of law and righteousness (*dharmapravartaka*), and harmonize the laws and duties of different social classes and groups. According to Kautilya, the king bore the responsibility of overseeing the moral behavior of his people. His writings reflect not only a vision of extensive royal authority but also a deeply embedded role of the king within all aspects of social life. Importantly, these ideas were not merely theoretical—they were rooted in existing traditions and the practical realities of governance.[38] Ancient Indian thinkers deeply and logically reflected on issues related to the individual, society, and the state, making the argument that there were no independent political treatises in that era baseless. Politics was integrated into Dharma, which was considered a comprehensive principle of life. Texts from the Vedic, Upanishadic, and Epic periods extensively discuss social and political aspects through the lens of Dharma. The rediscovery of Kautilya's Arthashastra further proved that well-developed ideas on Dandaniti (penal code) and Rajdharma (duties of a ruler) existed in ancient India.

Conclusion

In the early phases of historical writing, literary sources were not considered particularly useful by many historians, especially during the colonial period. These texts—such as the *Vedas*, *Smritis*, *Puranas*, and epics—were primarily seen as religious or philosophical works rather than historical records. However, later scholars began to recognize that these texts, though composed in a religious framework, contain a wealth of historical information. While they may not present history in a chronological or analytical manner, they reflect important details about political structures, social organization, and ruling dynasties of ancient India. In fact, for the period before the Mauryan Empire, literary texts are virtually the only available sources. Without them, the reconstruction of early Indian history would be severely limited, beginning only from the Mauryan period onward. Therefore, when interpreted critically and corroborated with archaeological and inscriptional evidence, these literary sources prove to be indispensable for understanding the political and cultural developments of ancient Indian civilization.

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