Writing Indian History: A View from Below

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Introduction pp3

In 1837, James Prinsep, an official of the Calcutta Mint and Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, interpreted for the first time since the earliest Brahmi script. This enabled the scholars to read the edicts of the great Emperor Asoka (273-232 BC) and recover a forgotten glorious period in Indian history. Further, the archaeological research conducted by the Department of Archaeological Survey of India that was established in 1862 under another British official, Alexander Cunningham, led to discovery of the great Indus Valley civilization. By the 1920s, the department could gather much information on this civilization. The credit for this monumental work of recovering the ancient history goes almost entirely to Western scholars.

As the scholars concluded, the Aryans invaded India around 1500 BC. They were believed to have come from Iran as that country was also known as *Ariana* (abode of Aryans) in Persian and as *Aryanam* in Sanskrit, thus a name derived from the same Sanskrit word, 'Arya', which originally meant 'noble'. The mention in Rig- Veda, which is considered to be an Aryan literature, of the Aryans' war with their enemies, the *Dasas* and *Dasyus* (as the natives are referred to therein) and the expansion of the geographic parameters of their domains from west (in the Punjab region) towards the east (the area now known as Delhi) and other places, led the scholars to conclude that the invaders came from the northwest, in due course subjugated the natives, and settled down in India. The word 'Arya' was later used by the Buddha to mean 'superiority of character and insight'. In the twentieth century, the word was also 'ruined by Hitler' when he used it to mean 'superiority by blood and birth'.

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There are several verses (in the *Manusmriti*) therein that degrade the sudras and the dalits (see Chapter 5). Some typical verses:

The only duty allotted by Brahma to a sudra is to serve the other three varnas obediently.
(1:91)
One who teaches on pay, one who is taught by such, one who is taught by a sudra, one who teaches a sudra, one who speaks rough, are all to be barred from ceremonies in honour of gods and ancestral spirits.
(3:156)

A sudra should never be taught by any worldly or economic matters. He should not be given counsel on righteous actions or on penance.
(4:80)

The brahminic religious scriptures had previously rested in the secluded custody of brahmins. Their contents were not disclosed to nay outsiders except among brahmins themselves. Even the Mughal emperor Akbar had failed to prevail upon them to reveal the doctrines of their religion. It was following the translations, as mentioned earlier, that the contents were finally revealed to the outside world as well as to most Indians. However, since then, researchers have found evidence of manipulations and interpolations that had been made in these scriptures over time, which were still claimed to be very ancient.

Extracts:

Chapter 4: Buddhism, Jainism and Brahminic Seers
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The title, 'brahmin', that the Buddha adopted, was only to distinguish those among the Arhats (enlightened) who had earned positions of honour and intended to make it known to others of those individuals' worthiness of real veneration and respect. It was a meaning completely different form that denoted by Brahmin 'caste' of social superiority or privilege. *Dhammapada* and *Sutta Nipata* mention: 'No Brahmin is such by birth. No outcaste is such by birth. An outcaste is such by his deeds. A Brahmin is such by his deeds. However, as it turned out to be later on an assumption of the same terminology, 'brahmin' in Buddhism as well as in Jainism, indirectly contributed to perpetuate the respectability of the same term in Brahminism. Anyone born in a Brahmin community, whether genuinely respectable or a scoundrel, still came to be called a Brahmin.

Brahminic scholars have advanced several other ideas also to mislead the people. One such attempt is to portray Buddhism and Jainism as partisan kshatriya movements, exploiting the fact that both the Buddha and Mahavira were born kshatriyas. This was untrue: as Uma Chakravarti mentions, in the Buddhist Sangha the largest unit consisted of Brahmins who, influenced by the teachings of the Buddha, realized that that they were defaulting from their original pursuit of salvation and leading a mundane existence. Ksahtriyas were only the second largest. Basham and Panikkar express a different view, suggesting that Buddhism and Jainism were especially popular with vaishyas (mercantile classes), and that it was their protest that is reflected in the Buddhist texts. As the second most powerful in the varna hierarchy, it is a rational assumption that only the kshatriyas were in a position to successfully organize such protest movements.

Kane has also made several misleading statements. He ascribed hypocrisy to the followers of the Buddha that they held a ritual 'closely resembling the rules of *Asvalayana grihyasutra*' for the Buddha, though early Buddhists performed hardly any religious ceremonies for a deceased person. Kane's contention goes unsupported, as this was a simple ceremony by which respects could be paid to the departed, and not one with Vedic religious significance. Furthermore, it is important to note that the Buddha was so liberal that he did not actively speak against or interfered with anyone conducting domestic rituals though he neither endorsed nor accepted it. Kane adds that the Buddha did not found a new religion, but he was only a great reformer of 'Hinduism' who laid sole stress on moral effort, *ahimsa* (non- violence), *satya* (truth), and so on. He contends that all these ideals were already integrated into 'Hinduism'. This is again a distortion of facts as, in fact, it was under the impact of Buddhism that Brahminism was forced to effect those changes. Kane also made an unjustifiable accusation against Buddhists and Buddhist literatures that the 'most hideous ceremonies' and ' the most obscene books' have passed under the name of religion as the creation of degraded Buddhism, as though Brahminism is free of such things.