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Suchitra Majumdar  
Research Scholar, Department  
of History, University of Delhi,  
Delhi, India

## Rethinking texts: Early Indian literary sources

Suchitra Majumdar

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### Abstract

There is immense variety in the literary sources pertaining to early Indian history. Till date there have been an emphasis on interpreting them in very straight forward ways, viz., texts being exclusive construction of certain classes in society. The present article shows how a more nuanced methodology for the reading of early Indian texts can help in this regard.

**Keywords:** Agama, itihasa, kavya, ramayana, jataka, kulastri, abhisarika

### Introduction

There is immense variety in the literary sources pertaining to early Indian history and there are differences in form, content and function. So are the methodological problems associated with them. Apart from a few general points like a gap between the actual composition and compilation, a large number of interpolations and extrapolations that coagulate over time, anonymity associated with authorship and existence of various chronological layers, there is also the issue of whether the texts were strictly exclusive constructions of certain classes in society.

Thus, one invariably arrives at a huge literature, divided into different genres namely, *Agama*, or, scriptures, *Shastras* or, technical treatises, *Itihasa*, or, narratives on the past, and finally the *Kavyas*, including poetry, drama, tale, and biography. These come handy with the problems listed just a while ago and are in a form from which history has to be 'prised out' (as Romila Thapar says). One comes across a lot many tendencies in the 'reading' of early Indian texts, ranging between extremes of rejecting them outrightly as lacking any history on one hand, and looking for real historical occurrences by finding archaeological evidence. The latter becomes futile owing to inherent problems of dating and authorship. There is one more tendency which sees the descriptions in texts as showing merely idealized and stereotyped images. It is in this context that works of scholars like A. K. Ramanujan, Sheldon Pollock, Shonaleeka Kaul and Uma Chakravarty become important who tried to bring forth newer dimensions in the methodology to deal with literature as a source of history.

In the context of literary images being idealized and stereotyped ones that works of A. K. Ramanujan becomes important, more so city images. Instead of using them in a literal straight forward fashion, one must look at it in its entirety, taking into account its vision, perspective, and the overall structure. Thus, one can then enter into the realm of symbolic value. By quoting the images of Ayodhya by the Valmiki *Ramayana*, he opines that even though the text may not be giving anything more than an idealized image of a city, yet an image can indeed be formed through the negation of what the city was not supposed to contain. Another of his essays named, 'Three Hundred *Ramayanas*', he brings out a large number of versions, or more aptly, different telling of the *Ramayana*. By going through the Sanskrit Valmiki *Ramayana*, the Kampan *Ramayana* and the Jaina *Ramayana*, etc., plus various folk versions of it, he focuses on the enormous variety in the form, content, vantage points, style, etc. in each one of them. Thus, the work very skillfully brings out the complexities and problems involved in using a text like *Ramayana(s)* as a source of direct history in terms of occurrences that actually took place, when clearly, an ocean full of multiple variations remain. In each one them the author brings out a fresh context out the pre-existing common code.

**Correspondence**  
Suchitra Majumdar  
Research Scholar, Department  
of History, University of Delhi,  
Delhi, India

While A.K. Ramanujan's work focuses upon ways in which stereotyped, idealized images of literature could be used as sources of history, and myriads of vantage points in the making of different telling of the epics like *Ramayana*, Uma Chakravarti actually wades through the *Jataka* stories to construct history of those sections of society who never wrote and were largely left out of literary culture. A large number of stories, according to Chakravarti had folk origins which were appropriated by the peripatetic Buddhists monks, to teach Buddhist ethics. When the audience was the popular masses, the content and form was thus moulded to suit the requirement of the audience. This certainly gave a certain degree of agency to the masses.

A recurring pattern in the *Jatakas* is the occurrence of a 'social dyad', consisting of a human, human animal and animal pairs. The latter two bring to our notice a marked participation of the lowly 'voiceless' people, who otherwise never participated in literary culture. It could be an untouchable Chandala from the *Setaketu Jataka*, who very confidently challenges a haughty Brahmana to an intellectual discourse and defeats him. Thus, very clearly the dominant order is being subverted. Certain other stories like the one in which a young bull calf doesn't budge until he is paid his promised due by a merchant, serves as an allegory for the rights of the voiceless, for all those who work but are not given their due. But representation of women in the *Jatakas* merely reiterates the apparent obsession in normative literature with the need to constantly guarding them and restricting their freedom. Yet, given the acts of subversion, one notices that representations are short of complete coherence, perhaps mainly because of the fact that the narratives were the creations of those who shared the values of the upper class at least in part.

In the article by Chakravarti named as, 'The Development of the Sita Myth: A Case Study of women in Myth and Literature', the author wades through a lot many telling of the *Ramayana* including the core *Ramayana*, and shows the way in which the chaste Sita myth developed, with its conspicuous focus on passivity and sexual subordination. This, she contends, shows that agriculturally developed society stressed more on chastity and passivity of women. Whereas, the tribal society like that of Lanka shows relatively free women. Thus, she draws a connection between socio economic conditions and women's position. She further underlined the way in which the non-classical and folk forms of *Ramayana* could be used to seek the 'voice' of supremely sacrificing and passive Sita. Hence, this could be one way to use texts for historical reconstruction, when there are bewildering varieties in even single texts.

Finally, one must take up the methodology applied in 'Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in early India' by Shonaleeka Kaul. While accepting the fact that literary sources do have their biases and perspectives, Kaul suggests that this could very well be identified and then used to attach some historical meaning to it. On the issue of the texts being representative of a certain class which uses it as the legitimizing source, Kaul suggests that there are problems with the *Kavyas* being taken solely as expressive of the dominant ideology. Though, the point can't itself be brushed aside, but literature cannot simply be accepted as exclusively serving the purpose of a class. This shallow reductionism restricts its other meaningful possibilities. On text as legitimizing tools, scholars like Sheldon Pollock go to an extreme, when they simply brush aside the relationship

between literature and political power as 'intellectually mechanical, culturally homogenizing, theoretically naïve' one, with no use at all. This is clearly not tenable, and the category as an analytical one is not at all useless.

Kaul works upon a new dimension of early Indian urbanism, of that of a behavioral one, in which the genre of *Kavya* has been used to find out how urban men and women behaved as social and sexual beings. The work derives heavily from the method as outlined by Ramanujan, who saw literature to be 'a repertoire of perception otherwise not available', and uses literally devices, motifs, and themes relating to the city which occur to make interpretations. *Kavyas* according to her resort to processes of selection, archetypization, and generate a fresh vision of subjective reality which act as semantic codes. As per the view that the literature is essentially elitist, Kaul suggests that even if the content of the *Kavyas* were drawn exclusively from the experience of higher classes, images/notions/trends coined by the elite could also very well permeate popular/subaltern culture, and vice versa. Through the study of *Kavya* archetypes of *Ganika* and *Kulastri*, Kaul tries to show that there was a lot of moral and behavioral complexity. Therefore finally, one can conclude by saying that while using early Indian texts as source of history, one must be very cautious and should deploy critical tools of analysis which are source-centric and take into account polyphonies, ambivalences, etc. lest the exercise should become a reductionist one.

### Conclusion

Early Indian texts are complex and multifaceted, requiring nuanced analytical approaches. Scholars like Ramanujan, Chakravarti, Kaul, and Pollock demonstrate the importance of considering multiple perspectives and ambiguities in these sources. By applying critical, source-centric methods, we can avoid reductionism and uncover deeper historical insights from these rich literary traditions.

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