

From the Chief Editor's Desk . . .

Historicity of Traditional Literature of India

The *Itihasa-Purana* tradition of ancient India has generally been neglected by modern historians as valid sources of history of early India. Its veracity and historicity is doubted on the ground that it contains legends, myths and superstitions and has no sense of time and authorship. Modern historiography, by and large, is positivistic and regards itself as an empirical science. Consequently, modern historians – Indian as well as westerners – educated and trained in the European concept of history consider history only as an empirical science – rational, scientific, fact-based studies within empirical time and space. Naturally, in such empirical and positivistic concept of history, the traditional literature of India – *Itihasa-Purana* and alike class is brushed aside as unhistorical, particularly on the ground that this traditional literature lacks in biographical and chronological elements. Moreover, it is interspersed with legends, myths and superstitions. Naturally, this has led western historians to propound the theory that the ancient India lacked in historical sense so much that it could not produce a single work of the historical category such as of Greece, Rome and China. Alberuni's opinion has been quoted to support this theory (Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, II, p. 10). This theory of lack of historical sense among early Indians has rightly been criticized by many historians of India. It is incorrect to presume that the empirical view of history is the only correct one and none other exists. The fact is that the theory of the absence of the historical sense amongst ancient Indians has emanated from the Greek-centered European ideology as well as 'Master' ideology of empiricism. It is needless to remind that ancient India has a sense of history of its own which is different from the empirical view of history of the west. India's vision of history is centered on its vision of man and time. While man's being is essentially and largely social and entirely historical and wholly empirical and linear in the eyes of modern man, ancient Indians believed that man's being is essentially and finally spiritual and time is cyclic or wave-like eternity. It has rightly been said that 'the two-selfed and twice-born traditional man lives in time but always acts as its victim. . . . Traditional man thus lacks the consciousness of history, that is the consciousness of uni-linear time' (A.D. Saran, in G.C. Pande, *An Approach to Indian Culture and Civilization*, 1985, p. 129). But man in ancient India did have the consciousness of eternal time which made him disdainful of empirical time. The ancient concept of time had been two-fold – cosmic and spiritual, that is related to *Samsara* and *Moksa*. Man as a social being has a transitory relationship with his generations because these are simply so many steps in the march of time in which, though the past is left behind, it has a future. Man as a spiritual being takes rebirth in perennial time through *karman* and perfects himself at a time or rather timelessness, which has no consciousness of the past except through indirect records. In view of this unbroken continuity of the spiritual man through *karman*, the physical man and his generations, which are just passing moments in eternal time, have little meaning. In view of ancient Indians, the transcendental history of the soul is beyond empirical knowledge. Tradition is perennial and continuous though it undergoes epochal changes. It may be appropriate to quote an authority on this subject, 'history refers to this inevitable vicissitudes which may be organized

into the epochs but which being cyclical preserve the perennial character of time. For this reason, history tends to lose its uniqueness and tends to become illustrative (G.C. Pande *op. cit.*, p. 130). Hence history in the traditional mind of India has been defined as 'a store house of wisdom, of *Veda*', rather than 'a collection of stock tales (*Arthashastra*, 1.3.2.) and it is illustrative of moral and spiritual laws of action and change by the recollection of the past as preserved in the tradition (*Abhinavabharati*, I, pp. 53-54). It connects the broad empirical instances with ideal meanings and thus bridges the empirical and transcendent. Therefore, the spiritual value of history is superior and higher to that of rational Philosophy as well as of mere art and literature since it incorporates 'the supreme wisdom of the vanity of ephemeral things' (*Pancadasi*, 7.4.2-24).

To ancient Indians, the subject matter of history is the traditional dimensions of man as his spiritual being. It is obvious that in such uplifted, highly spiritual vision of man and eternal time, history ceases to be a biography of great men and the rise and fall of empires. To me, it appears that history assumed the contours of spiritual logos in which the successive development of ideals, beliefs, and meanings of life and culture forms the themes of history writings as is found in the traditional literature of India rather than the accounts of mundane socio-political events. It is this difference in the vision of history among the Indians and the Europeans which has been responsible for neglecting the traditional *Itihasa-Purana* tradition of India as valid sources of history. The Indian vision of history rather than the alleged absence of historical sense of itself has been responsible for the absence of the so-called historical works in ancient India. The historicity of traditional literature of India, particularly the *Itihasa-Purana* tradition, may be established in the light of the Indian concept of history as discussed earlier. The *Itihasa-Purana* tradition of ancient India was continued by the *Vamsas* and *Gotrapravarasuchis*, *Gathas* and *Namasamsis* and *Itihasa-Puranas*, *Akhyanas* of the *Vedic* literature and the *Vamsanucarita* of the *Puranas* and carried forward by the regional chronicles after the sixth century A.D. and by the Jains in western India in the twelfth and thirteenth century A.D. The *Pali* chronicles of Sri Lanka – the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* also contain this Indian historical tradition. Kalhana, the first real historian of India, may be situated inside their Indian tradition of historiography in the light of the total milieu, circumstances and the past tradition of *Itihasa-Puranas*. This synoptic review of traditional literature shows that ancient Indians did have a sense of Indian history. No doubt, scholars like Pargiter, V.S. Agarwal, R.C. Hazra and some recent scholars have studied this *Itihasa-Purana* tradition of ancient India as sources for history of India, but there is still further need to make historical use of these sources – *Vedic-Epic-Puranic* and *Charita* literature along with Buddhist and Jain historical tradition so that traditional praxis of our history may be enlightened. It is another matter that the source may be compared and corroborated by other sources such as foreigners' accounts and archaeology. In view of this I appeal for further intensive study of the *Itihasa-Purana* tradition of India.

It is a matter of privilege for me to present herewith this issue of *Summerhill* to the interested reading public.