

Writing Cultural History of Early India: V.S. Agrawala and the Indigenous Concept of History

Shubhneet Kaushik*

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the spread of print culture and the growing impact of modern Western education led Indians to participate in the process of the knowledge production. Scholars like Rajendra Lal Mitra (1824-1891), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), V.K. Rajwade (1863-1926), R.G. Bhandarkar (1837-1925), Akshay Kumar Maitreya (1861-1930) challenged the idea of colonial historians that Indians lacked historical sense. Institutions like the Bharatiya Itihas Samsodhak Mandal, Deccan Vernacular Translation Society, and Varendra Anusandhan Samiti devoted their attention to collect the historical documents, manuscripts, epigraphs and related material. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya had referred to this process as 'talking back'; when Indian intellectuals while asserting the civilizational unity of India, 'talk back to their colonial masters in refutation of disparagement of ancient Indian civilization by colonial historians.'¹ History writing also received attention from intelligentsia of the North India as a discipline to reflect about the past. Starting from Raja Shiv Prasad (1823-1895) and Bharatendu Harischandra (1850-1885), intellectuals in the Hindi public sphere paid enough attention to history and history-writing. In the twentieth century, scholars like Gaurishankar Hirachand Ojha (1863-1947), K.P. Jayaswal (1881-1937), Munshi Devi Prasad (1847-1923), Bisheshwar Nath Reu (1890-1966), V.S. Agrawala (1904-1966), and others further contributed to the ongoing process of reconstruction of the past. This essay analyses the significant contributions of historian V.S. Agrawala to the evolution of the historian's craft in India.

Vasudeva Saran Agrawala was an Indologist with a deep interest in literature, history, art, and architecture. Born in a village of Meerut district of the United Provinces,

Agrawala completed his M.A. from Lucknow University in 1929 and his Ph.D. and D. Litt., both from Lucknow University in 1941 and 1946 respectively. In 1931, he was appointed as the curator of the Mathura Museum. Nine years later, he became the Director of the State Museum, Lucknow. In 1946, Agrawala took charge of the Central Asian Antiquities Museum at Delhi as Superintendent for Museums under the Archeological Survey of India. And in 1951, he joined Banaras Hindu University as Professor in the Department of Art and Culture. Agrawala wrote voluminously on the social and cultural history of early India, on the Puranas and Vedic texts, on Indian art and architecture, on archaeology, inscriptions, and coins.²

Agrawala's interest in cultural history was reflected in most of the early essays that he wrote on the various aspects of the cultural pasts of early India. These essays were first published in Hindi journals like *Madhuri*, *Veena*, and *Nagari Pracharini Patrika*, etc. In the fourth decade of the twentieth century, Agrawala was also associated with the *Janapadiya Andolan*.³ The *Janapadiya Andolan* was the brainchild of Banarasidas Chaturvedi (1892-1985), the editor of Hindi journal *Vishal Bharat*. In this context, following a resolution passed at the Haridwar session of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan held in 1942, a committee was formed with the objective of 'studying the culture, geography, language, literature, flora, and fauna of a region (*janapad*) and to further enrich the vocabulary as well as the literary resources of Hindi.' The members of this committee were Vasudeva Saran Agrawala, Jainendra Kumar (1905-1988), Devendra Satyarthi (1908-2003), Banarasidas Chaturvedi, Chandrabali Pandey (1904-1958), and Rahul Sankrityayana (1893-1963). Agrawala was exchanging letters with Banarasidas Chaturvedi since 1940, regarding the study of *Janapada*. In these letters, he not only emphasized the importance of such studies, which Banarasidas Chaturvedi had initiated but also laid out the detailed plan for pursuing such studies.⁴

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Satish Chandra College, Ballia-277001. Email: shubhneetkaushik@gmail.com

Understanding Janapadas: Bridge between Region and Nation

V.S. Agrawala took inspiration from the Prithvi Sukta of the *Atharvaveda* which declared the land as the mother (*Mata bhumi putroham prithivyah, 12.1.1-63* [‘I am the son of Mother Earth’]). His deep involvement with the activities of the *janapadiya andolan* also led Agrawala to write a couple of essays on the Prithvi Sukta and its significance.⁵ He even titled the collection of these essays as *Prithvi-putra*, which was first published in 1949. For him, being the son of the earth/soil (*Prithvi-putra*) was more of a spiritual and religious experience. In his essays on cultural history, Agrawala insisted on exploring the intricate relationship between the land, the people, and their culture (*bhumi-jan-sanskriti*). Agrawala prepared a detailed five-year plan for the study of the language, culture, social customs, religious beliefs and traditions of the different regions (*janapada*) and the villages of Hindi speaking areas. For him, this was a necessary step in the direction of making Hindi the national language of India because he believed that the culture of these regions was part of the national consciousness (*Rashtriya Chetna*). This attempt, Agrawala believed, would immensely enrich the reservoir of Hindi and would certainly act as a bridge between different regions. Agrawala named this plan ‘*Janapada Kalyani Yojana*’. He proposed the following activities during the five years of the plan:

Year 1: Focusing on the literature of the region, collecting folk songs, folktales, ballads as well as other samples of the regional literary culture; compiling and editing this collected material

Year 2: Studying the regional variants of Hindi language (*janapadiya bhasha*) relying on the methods of philology, giving special attention to etymology, phonetics, vocabulary.

Year 3: Study of the regional geography, local histories, archeology, and craft.

Year 4: Natural resources of the region, including flora and fauna, soil, minerals, agriculture.

Year 5: Studying the culture of a region, religious belief, and faith, social customs, fairs, and festivals.

This plan also suggested that eight committees be formed to collect information regarding various subjects, including language, dictionary, and glossary (*Bhasha Samiti*); geographical description of a region, place names, river and other physical features (*Bhugol ya deshdarshan Samiti*), birds and animals (*pashu-pakshi Samiti*), trees and plants (*Vriksha-vanaspati Samiti*); village/folk songs, folktales (*gram-geet Samiti*); popular customs, traditions

and rituals (*jan vijnana samiti*); history and archaeology (*itihhas-puratattva samiti*); agriculture, craft, and minerals (*khaniy padartha aur krishi udyog samiti*).⁶ An annual report would present the details of material collected in each year. Agrawala also suggested publishing the collected information in journals devoted to the regional culture and heritage like *Madhukar*, *Brajbharati*, and *Bandhav*. In this regard, Agrawala viewed the works of philologist R.L. Turner and Irish linguist George Grierson (1851-1941) on Nepali and Kashmiri language respectively, as a model for studying the dialects of the Hindi belt.⁷ He particularly mentioned the works of Hungarian-born British archaeologist Aurel Stein (1862-1943).⁸ In his letters to Banarasidas Chaturvedi, Agrawala time and again insisted on collecting the words, sayings, and stories, etc. from the regional languages and dialects.

Agrawala found the insights from subjects like comparative philology and linguistics especially useful for studying the *Janapadas*. In his famous essay titled ‘*Janapadiya adhyayn ki aankh*’, Agrawala opined that *Janapadas* carried forward the tradition of thousand years in a continuum and that the villages are sons of the earth in the true sense (*sachche artho me Prithvi ke putra*). Even Emperor Asoka’s rock edict and ideas expressed in them inspired the protagonists of the *Janapada* movement; e.g. V.S. Agrawala approvingly quoted these lines from one of the rock edicts: *Janapadasa ca Janasa Dasane Dhammanusathi ca Dhammapalipucha ca* (‘visits to the people of the rural divisions (*janapadas*), instruction in Dhamma and discussions and questions on Dhamma’). Study of the *Janapadas* and their language and culture was even seen as the part of nation-building and national reconstruction. ‘Study of the *Janapada*’, Agrawala argued, ‘is the vanguard of national programme’ (*Janapadiya adhyayan rashtriya karyakram ka haraval dasta hai*).⁹ Human beings and human society was at the focus of the study of the *Janapadas*. For enriching Hindi language, Agrawala proposed a translation scheme, which included the translation of the classic Sanskrit texts into Hindi; translation of Pali, Ardha Magadhi and Prakrit texts; Tanjur and Kanjur; translation of the Avesta and ancient Iranian texts; translation of the travelogues of Arabic travellers as well as historical texts written during the Sultanate period and the Mughal period; translation of the travelogues of European travellers; and translation of modern world literature into Hindi. The *Janapadiya* movement became the centre of controversy later when some Hindi enthusiasts started opposing it claiming this movement was aimed at dividing the Hindi speaking area.¹⁰ They even objected to the use of the term ‘*vikendrikaran*’ (decentralization) by the protagonist of the *Janapadiya* movement, Banarasidas Chaturvedi.¹¹ Due to this controversy, in November 1943, Banarasidas Chaturvedi resigned from the *Janapada*

Committee formed by the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, and gradually the *Janapada* movement lost its direction.

Agrawala even characterized the nation (*Rashtra*) as the *Kalpavriksha* (a mythological, wish fulfilling tree) which was the connecting thread between the past, present, and future. This *Kalpavriksha*, Agrawala argued was immortal and infinite, and intimately related with national consciousness and also represents the condition of national life. Agrawala was so attached to the idea of the *Kalpavriksha* that he titled the collection of his essays on ancient Indian culture, particularly of the Vedic age, as the *Kalpavriksha*. The living part (*pranvant paksa*) of knowledge systems of the past societies always attracted Agrawala. Understanding the inner meaning of the Veda, *dharma*, and culture was essential for him as it was related to the elements of life. He even devoted himself to understand the cultural metaphors of the Vedic Age.¹² Knowing one's own culture was essential, but that did not mean, Agrawala remarked, the exclusion of other cultures. Assimilating the ideals of one's culture would lead one to know about the other cultures and would lead to develop respect and sympathetic attitude towards other cultures. Reflecting on the interrelationship between the nation and culture, Agrawala suggested that one should be rational while dealing with culture. In his view, only those elements of Indian culture should be adopted which are relevant for the development of the nation and could contribute to the enrichment of the national life. Agrawala viewed the meeting of the old and new cultures as a 'hope for humanity'.

Itihas-Darshan: Philosophy of History

In a long essay titled "*Itihas-darshan*", which was published in the *Madhuri*, Agrawala thoroughly examined the philosophy of history.¹³ Agrawala in this essay held that each culture had its specific notions of the past as well as the idea of history. Therefore, these specificities, which vary according to time and space, should be kept in mind while writing history. Agrawala also elaborated the scheme of the calculation of time which was prevalent in early India, including *Kalpa*, *Manvantar*, and *Yuga*. Defining the Indian concept of time in sharp contrast to the Western notion of time, Agrawala argued that early Indian society had no concept of unique events or linear time, as the time was calculated in cycles. He pointed out that the early use of the word 'itihas' was very different from the modern idea of 'history'. Emphasizing the comparative study of different cultures of the world, he criticized the Eurocentric nature of the popular texts written on the world history.

In this essay, V.S. Agrawala approvingly cited Oswald Spengler's monumental work *The Decline of the*

West and praised his ideas about history, culture, and civilization. Spengler challenged Eurocentric history and developed the notion which viewed every culture as a living organism. While dealing with eight 'high cultures' of human civilization, namely, Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Classical (Greek and Roman), Arabian, Western, and Mexican (Aztec/Mayan), Spengler also tried to identify each culture's birth, growth, decline, and death. But Spengler's views on Indian culture and its conception of history were quite problematic. Strangely, Spengler reproduces the colonial stereotypes about India in his dealing with Indian culture, which he tends to see as 'ahistorical'. 'There is,' argued Spengler, 'no pure Indian astronomy, no calendar, and therefore no history so far as history is the track of a conscious spiritual evolution.' His views on Indian philosophy are no different than his views on Indian history:

The world-consciousness of Indian man was so ahistorically built that it could not even treat the appearance of a book written by a single author as an event determinate in time. Instead of an organic series of writings by specific persons, there came into being gradually a vague mass of texts into which everyone inserted what he pleased, and notions such as those of intellectual epochs, played no part in the matter. It is in this anonymous form that we possess the Indian philosophy – which is at the same time all the Indian history that we have – and it is instructive to compare with it the philosophy-history of the west, which is a perfectly definite structure made up of individual books and personalities.¹⁴

Agrawala in his essay on the philosophy of history and concept of time in Indian tradition relied solely on the Vedic sources, Brahmanas, Smritis, and Puranas and did not even mention the Buddhist and Jain historical traditions and their notion of time. While rightly criticizing the Eurocentric nature of modern history writing and the exclusion of concepts of history prevalent in other cultures, Agrawala commits a similar mistake by not taking into account the Buddhist and Jain historical traditions and the concept of time embedded in Buddhist and Jain texts. While various notions of time like cosmological time, generational time, and linear time existed in the Buddhist tradition like the Puranic tradition, but their context is significantly different from the Puranic tradition.¹⁵ The Buddhist and Jain conceptions of the past are not just remarkably different from the Puranic notions of the past, but as Romila Thapar pointed out:

They [Buddhist and Jain chronicles] are different in many ways – in their genres, in the initial languages used, and, more importantly, in the intentions of the authors. There is a concern for a reasonably acceptable chronology and a well-defined ideological purpose in the historical account. These historical traditions are an alternative to the Puranic.¹⁶

India as Known to Panini: V.S. Agrawala and Paninikalin Bharatvarsas

In 1955, V.S. Agrawala published his celebrated book, which was a cultural and historical study of Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*. The writings of Radha Kumud Mookerji (1884-1963), who also happened to be research supervisor of V.S. Agrawala in Lucknow University, were the inspiration behind this book and it was an extended version of the two-volume dissertation that Agrawala submitted to Lucknow University. Exploring the rich reservoir of the *sutras* of Panini as well as using the diverse sources like Vedic Samhita, *Brahmanas*, *Sutras* (*Srauta*, *Dharma*, and *Grihya*), *Pratishakhya*, *Mahabharat*, Pali texts, *Jatakas* and *Agama* literature, Agrawala provided a vivid picture of the social life in early India. The *sutras* of Panini, Agrawala opined, should be treated as authentic and reliable historical evidence like rock edicts and coins.¹⁷ Though *Ashtadhyayi* was a text on *Vyakarana* (Grammar), and Panini was a well-known grammarian, but Agrawala through his detailed analysis of the text showed us that Panini gave us valuable information regarding contemporary Indian society, its social institutions and social structure, geography, economic condition, education and literary culture, religious ideas, and philosophy, polity and governance, etc. Similarly, Panini's text and the word roots that Panini collected in his work are equally crucial for a comparative study of the Indo-Aryan languages and their dialects. Panini believed that it is the common people who create and give shape to a language.

Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* mentioned the places from Central Asia to Kalinga (present day Odisha) and from Sauvira (present-day Sindh) to Assam. Panini was familiar with the oceans, and he also mentioned the names of the rivers like Suvastu, Sindhu (Indus), Vipasha, Uddhaya, Bhidya, Devika, Sarayu, Ajirvati, Sharavati, Charmanvati, etc. Panini also provides us information about the prevailing social system like Varnashrama, Gotras, and kinship. Agrawala argued that Panini's period (circa fifth century B.C.) was also a period of social crisis for the Vedic culture and social structure of the Aryans which had to incorporate non-Aryans like Mundas, Nishadas, and Shabars as well as the foreigners like Scythians and Greeks among others.¹⁸

Due to the importance of auspicious time for performing rituals, time reckoning in early India was already quite developed. Panini informs us about different units of calculating time like *ahoratra* (day and night), *paksha* (fortnight), *masa* (month), *shanmasa*, *varsha* (year), *ayan*, etc. A day (*divas*) was further divided into *muhurtas* and based on the location of the sun in sky divided into *Puroahna* and *Aprahna*, while the night (*ratri*)

was divided into *Purvaratra* and *Apararatra*. The time of transition when day and night meet together was known as *sandhivela*.¹⁹

The *Ashtadhyayi*, Agrawala revealed, also gave a vivid description of flora and fauna of early India. In addition to the art and craft, Panini gave immensely rich information about the commerce and trade, agriculture. On the basis of the ploughshare that they possessed, Panini categorized the farmers into three categories, namely, *Ahali* (farmers who do not have a ploughshare of their own), *Suhali* (farmers who had a good ploughshare), *Durhali* (farmers with old ploughshare). Agrawala also described the education system which was prevalent in Panini's time, the relationship between teachers and students, the curriculum and rules of teaching and study. Both Panini and Patanjali had mentioned the women who studied in the Vedic *charans* (*ashramas*). These women scholars also studied the philosophical subjects like Mimamsa. The regular female students were known as *Adhyetri* and their residence was called *Chhatrishala*. The contemporaries of Panini were familiar with the art of writing.

Religious ideas of the later Vedic age, rituals and sacrifices, religious beliefs and practices of those times were also the subject of interest for Panini. And on these topics, Agrawala argued, Panini provides us rich and authentic historical description. From *Ashtadhyayi*, we came to know about the philosophical ideas (*darshana*) of materialist thinkers and philosophers like Puran Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala and the Lokayata and Ajivikas. Commenting on the polity and administration during Panini's period, Agrawala noted that both state (*Rajya*) and federation (*sangha*) were the prevalent political systems in that period. The whole territory of a *janapada* was known as *Prithvi* and the ruler of that territory was called *Parthiv*. A larger territory than *janapada* was called *sarvabhumi* and its ruler was known as *Sarvabhaum*.²⁰ The king was also known as Bhupati ('the owner of the land'). In the monarchical rule (*Ekraj shasan*), the king was superior, but he also had a council-of-ministers (*mantri parishad*) to help him. These councils were further organized into three councils related to social, political and educational matters, namely *samajik parishad*, *rajnaitik parishad* and *vidya sambandhi parishad*. *Charan*, *Gotra* and *Janapada* were three important educational, social and political institutions respectively.

Regarding the period of Panini, scholars like R.G. Bhandarkar and D.R. Bhandarkar (1875-1950) had opined that he lived in the seventh century B.C., but Agrawala was of the opinion that Panini was born two centuries later in the fifth century B.C. To support his view, Agrawala compared the language of *Jatakas* and Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* and showed a remarkable similarity between them. Agrawala also agreed with scholars like Theodor

Goldstucker (1821-1872) who were of the opinion that the language Panini used in his text was the spoken language of the literate class of that period.²¹

Kadambari and Harsacarita: A Cultural Study

Banabhatta, who was contemporary to Harsha (606-648 A.D.), gave a lively and vivid description of his social and political milieu in his masterpiece *Kadambari*, which he referred to as *Katha*.²² Apart from familiarizing us with Bana's contemporary society, *Kadambari* also informs us about the social life in the cities like Ujjayini and marketplaces as well as trade and commerce; about art, architecture, painting and literature; ideas of kingship, courts, palaces and royal etiquettes; Council of ministers; temples; flora and fauna, etc. V.S. Agrawala compared the narrative structure of *Kadambari* with the plan of the royal palace of that time and argued that like those palaces which were divided into four parts namely *Mukhmandap*, *Rangmandap*, *Antaramandap* and *Garbhagrih*; *Kadambari* too was divided into four similar parts. While elaborating the deeds of king Shudraka, Banabhatta also laid before us the ideal of kingship which was prevalent during his period.²³ Agrawala also showed that *Kadambari* gave us useful insight regarding the religions and sects, religious beliefs and practices, and superstitions prevalent in the seventh century.

Seventh century A.D. was a remarkable and watershed period for music, language, literature and art, as it marked the beginning of the *ragas* and *raginis* in music, beginning of Apabhramsa language and also the emergence of Apabhramsa style of painting. Bana also informs us about the instruments used for measurement of the time, namely, *chhaya/dhupghadi* (sun dial) and *nalika/jalghadi* (water clock or clepsydra). Similarly, while describing the education of the characters of *Kadambari*, Bana also gave us a detailed description of education and curriculum including *vyakarana*, *mimamsa*, *nyaya*, and *dharma*. *Kadambari* also gave us an account of the sports and leisure activities like *dyutkrida* (gambling), *chaupad*, *vina*, *paheli* (puzzles), *tripadi*, *patrabhang*, etc. Comparing the *Kadambari* with the *Harsacarita*, Romila Thapar points out:

The *Kadambari* acts as the structural opposite of the *Harsacarita* – in that the royal biography is the text on the court and settled society (the *grama*), whilst the *Kadambari* is a fantasy based on the court poet's perception of the forest (the *aranya*).²⁴

Before embarking on a cultural study of the *Kadambari*, Agrawala had studied another famous historical text of Banabhatta, the *Harsacarita*. Agrawala's book *Harsacarita: Ek Sanskritik Adhyayan* was first presented as a series of lectures organized by Bihar Rashtrabhasha

Parishad in March 1951. In the introduction to the first edition of this book, Agrawala laid out a detailed plan for a comprehensive study of Banabhatta's corpus. This included publishing an authentic version of both *Kadambari* and *Harsacarita* with commentary in Hindi; literary study of both these texts; historical analysis of the cultural material available in these texts; preparing a glossary based on these texts.²⁵ Bana had distinguished between *Kadambari* and *Harsacarita* by calling them *Katha* and *Akhyayika* respectively. While the *Katha* is a work of fiction and imagination, the *Akhyayika* is based on historical events. With his detailed examination of *Harsacarita*, Agrawala present before us an elaborate picture of the North Indian society of the seventh century A.D. Agrawala not only examined the literary style of Bana as reflected in *Harsacarita* but also familiarize us with Bana's view on literature and his literary predecessors. Regarding art and architecture, Agrawala showed that in the *Harsacarita* we found valuable information not only about the life of Harsha and his family but also about Bana's own life. Further, the *Harsacarita* not only adds to our knowledge about the architectural plans of the houses and palaces, but also provides historical information about music and dance, costumes of the king and his *samanta* as well as about art of printing and dyeing of clothes. The *Harsacarita* also provides us insight into the war strategies, the organization of the army including elephant army (*Gajsena*) and cavalry.²⁶ Apart from the political events, Bana also throws light on the cultural aspect of his contemporary society, such as the rituals of marriage and death, the religious sects, and lives of forest dwellers and Harsha's encounter with the forest dwellers as well as about flora and fauna of the Vindhya region. According to historian V.S. Pathak, in the *Harsacarita*, Banabhatta had shown the achievement of royal glory in five stages: beginning (*prarambha*), efforts (*prayatna*), hope of achieving the end (*praptyasa*), certainty of achievement (*niyatapti*), and achievement (*phalagama*).²⁷ The *Harsacarita*, as Romila Thapar points out, 'spans various contexts and questions some of the assumptions of a *carita*, making it thereby more of a historical document than just a literary form.'²⁸ Commenting on V.S. Agrawala's study of *Harsacarita*, D.D. Kosambi pointed out:

Harsacarita by V.S. Agrawala (Patna, 1953) gives valuable collation with archeological data from sculptures, but suffers by taking the *Sukraniti* as descriptive of the Gupta administration. That work [*Sukraniti*] mentions gunpowder (including the formula) and firearms five separate times, hence belongs to the late Muslim period as its editor and translator B.K. Sarkar (Allahabad, 1925) has shown.²⁹

After working on *Harsacarita*, V.S. Agrawala edited and wrote a commentary on Vidyapati's *Kirtilata* and Malik

Muhammad Jayasi's *Padmavat*. Agrawala's commentary (*samjivani tika*) on the *Padmavat* was published in 1955 by Sahitya Sadan (Jhansi), which was owned by famous Hindi poet Maithilisharan Gupta.³⁰ Agrawala dedicated his commentary on the *Padmavat* to famous literary critique Acharya Ramchandra Shukla (1884-1941), who had edited the first edition of the *Padmavat* in the Nagari script, which was published by Kashi Nagari Pracharini Sabha in 1924. In 1925, Agrawala read this edition while he was in his graduation and also attended a talk delivered by Ramchandra Shukla on the *Padmavat*, which left a lasting impression on Agrawala.³¹ For preparing his critical edition of *Padmavat*, Agrawala had consulted various manuscripts of *Padmavat* including one which was available at Rampur Museum; this manuscript was written in Arabic script with commentary in Persian. Agrawala praised the *Padmavat* as one of the best *prabandh-kavya* in Awadhi language.

In *Padmavat*, Jayasi presented a brilliant, imaginative account of love, which he held as the eternal truth of human life. Before the arrival of Jayasi, the literary culture of Awadhi was enriched by poets like Mulla Daud, Ishardas, Kutuban, Chanda, Burhan, Baxan, and Sadhan. Mulla Daud had written his famous work *Chandayan* in Awadhi in 1370 A.D.³² Malik Muhammad Jayasi wrote *Padmavat* during 1527-1540 A.D. Jayasi was not only influenced by Persian romances (*masnavi*), but he also inherited the tradition of *prabandha-kavyas* of Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramsha. Spiritual ideas and symbolism of different religious sects like Sahajyana, Nathpanthis, Nirguna and Sufis had deep influence over Jayasi's thoughts and his literary expressions.³³ Agrawala also differed with earlier editions of *Padmavat* edited by Ramachandra Shukla and Mataprasad Gupta.

Towards an Aesthetics of Indian Art

V.S. Agrawala's keen interest in the art and architecture of India, as apparent from his studies of *Kadambari*, *Harsacarita* and numerous essays that he contributed to the Hindi journals on this theme, eventually led him to write a comprehensive history of Indian art covering the period from pre-historic age to the period of the Andhra Satvahana (*circa* third century A.D.).³⁴ In this chronological history of art, he studied the special characteristics of art in a succession of the historical period including pre-historic age; Indus valley civilization; Vedic Age and historical importance of the symbols attached to Vedic Age in the context of the history of Indian art; art during the Mahajanapada period; symbols inscribed on the punched coins (*ahat mudra*) and their meaning; art during Sisunaga and Nanda dynasty; Mauryan art; Sunga art; caves of Udayagiri and Khandagiri and Buddhist Viharas,

Chaityas; Sunga and Kushana art of Mathura region; Gandhara art; Stupas of Andhra Satvahana period; Indian terracotta art; and symbols and icons in the art of the Sanskrit age. His deep interest in the art of Kushana and Gupta period began when he was attracted by aesthetic and historical significance of the Mathura sculptures and terracotta, while he was the Curator at Mathura Museum from 1931 to 1940. Deeply influenced by the incisive work of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), V.S. Agrawala viewed Indian art as the representative of the imagination and brilliance of the Indian people.

To understand Indian art, argued Ananda Coomaraswamy in his famous work on Indian Art, one has to understand Indian society as a whole, not an individual artist: 'To understand at all, we must understand experiences common to all men of the time and place in which a given work is produced.' Emphasizing the idea of anonymity in Indian art, Coomaraswamy noted: 'The Indian artist, although a person, is not a personality; his personal idiosyncrasy is at the most a part of his equipment, and never the occasion of his art.' Art was part of daily life and inherent in everyday activities of the people. In the Indian context, viewing art as an intellectual act, Coomaraswamy opined:

Art is primarily an intellectual act; it is the conception of form, corresponding to an idea in the mind of the artist. It is not when he observes nature with curiosity, but when the intellect is self-poised, that the forms of art are conceived. The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist, or else is something less than a man.³⁵

Like Coomaraswamy, V.S. Agrawala too sincerely felt that the Indian art should not be evaluated the standards set up by the Western art critics, rather one needs to develop a different sensibility to evaluate Indian art and to grasp its inner meaning. For Agrawala, the realization of the inner meaning of artwork was more important than just evaluating and narrating its outward appearance. He also tried to use those original terms for the art in his analysis which were used in the contemporary literature of Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and other texts.³⁶ For grasping the cultural meaning of the art which was part of the cultural consciousness of India once, Agrawala relied on the inter-relationship between art and literature and held Indian art as the mirror for Indian philosophical thoughts, religious ideas, and Indian culture. The literary background of this historical process is evident from Panini and Jataka to Hemchandra. Thus, to find the true meaning of an artwork or a poetic work one should understand its four elements, i.e., *rasa*, *artha*, *chhanda*, and *shabd/rupa*. While discussing the Gandhara School of art, Agrawala also focused on the exchanges between Indian art and Iranian and Greek art. He also paid attention to

the development of the ornate style of Indian art and the process by which it acquired its meaningfulness as an art form.

To conclude, through his insightful historical works V.S. Agrawala, not only enriched our understanding of early India, but he also contributed significantly to the craft of history writing in India. Focusing on various aspects of land, people, and culture (*bhumi-jan-sanskriti*), Agrawala tried to bridge the gap between regionalism and nationhood. Through an in-depth historical analysis of the region, its socio-cultural and economic aspects, rituals and customs, language and literature, and further linking it with the spirit of the nation, Agrawala tried to grasp the national consciousness in its totality. His works not only present the living and vibrant parts of the Indian knowledge systems but also engages with the cultural metaphors and their deeper meanings. While critiquing the Eurocentric nature of the philosophy of history, Agrawala also conceptualized an indigenous concept of philosophy of history (*itihas-darshan*). This conception showed greater empathy and appreciation towards the historical consciousness of non-European societies.

Notes

1. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Talking Back: The Idea of Civilization in Indian Nationalist Discourse*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.
2. For an exhaustive list of his works, see *Prof. Vasudeva Saran Agrawala: A Bibliographic Survey of his Published Works*, compiled by Jagdish Chandra, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1994.
3. *Aaj*, May 25, 1943.
4. See, V.S. Agrawala to Banarasidas Chaturvedi, July 25, 1940 and January 11, 1941, letters published as the Appendix (*Parishist*) in V.S. Agrawala, *Prithvi-putra*, New Delhi: Sasta Sahitya Mandal, 2009 [1949], pp. 145-147.
5. See, Agrawala's essays 'Prithvi-putra'; 'Prithvi-sukta – ek adhyayan'; 'Bhumi ko devattva pradan' in *Ibid.*
6. See, Agrawala's essay 'Janapadiya Karyakram' in Agrawala, *Prithvi-putra*, pp. 64-69.
7. While R.L. Turner's dictionary of the Nepali language titled *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language* was published in 1931, George Grierson's *A Dictionary of the Kashmiri Language* was published in 1916. Agrawala was also impressed by Grierson's work on the languages of Dard region, which was titled as "The Iranian Hindukush dialects called Munjani and Yudghi". Agrawala also mentioned a technical glossary published by the Anjuman-i Taraqqi-i Urdu titled *Farhang-i Istilahat-i Peshevaran*.
8. V.S. Agrawala to Banarasidas Chaturvedi, May 18, 1943, in Agrawala, *Prithvi-putra*, pp. 147-150.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
10. Chandrabali Pandey, who was a member of the committee formed to study the literature of Janapada, in an essay written in 1943, criticized the idea of Janapadiya andolan. See, "Sammelan aur Janapad", in Chandrabali Pandey, *Rashtrabhasha par vichar*, Varanasi: Kashi Nagari Pracharini Sabha, 1957, pp. 185-188.
11. For the details of this controversy and Agrawala's defence of the Janapadiya movement, see his letters to Banarasidas Chaturvedi, June 8, 1943; June 11, 1943; August 23, 1943; November 18, 1943; and November 22, 1943, in Agrawala, *Prithvi-putra*, pp. 150-161.
12. See, Agrawala's essays "Vedic Paribhasha me sharir ki sanjnaen"; "Parikshit ka sarp"; "Chyavan and Ashvinikumar", in V.S. Agrawala, *Kalpavriksha Prachin Bharatiya Sanskriti ka darshan karane wale nibandh*, New Delhi: Sasta Sahitya Mandal, 1998 [1953], pp. 91 ff.
13. V.S. Agrawala, "Itihas-darshan", *Madhuri*, Vol. I, Part 1, pp. 41-65; see also V.S. Agrawala, *Itihasa-Darsana*, edited by P.K. Agrawala, Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1978, pp. 3-35.
14. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926, p. 12.
15. For a detailed discussion of the time reckoning in early India, see Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
16. Romila Thapar, "The Buddhist Tradition Monk as Historians", in Thapar, *The Past Before Us*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2013, p. 380.
17. V.S. Agrawala, *Paninikalin Bharatvarsa*, Varanasi: Chaukhambha Vidyabhavan, 1955, p. 7.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 173 ff.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 384.
21. In 1861, Theodor Goldstucker wrote a book on Panini in which he tried to answer the literary and chronological questions related to Panini and his text *Ashtadhyayi*. See, Theodor Goldstucker, *Panini, His Place in Sanskrit Literature*, London: N. Trubner & Co., 1861.
22. According to the *Agni Purana*, there were five categories of prose literature (*gadya kaavya*): *Akhyayika*, *katha*, *khandkatha*, *parikatha*, and *kathanika*.
23. V.S. Agrawala, *Kadambari Ek Sanskritik Adhyayan*, Varanasi, 1958, p. 16.
24. Romila Thapar, "Historical Biographies: The *Harsacarita* and the *Ramacarita*", in Thapar, *The Past Before Us*, p. 494.
25. V.S. Agrawala, *Harsacarita: Ek Sanskritik Adhyayan*, Patna: Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad, 1964 [1953], see Introduction.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-44, 129-133, 159-161.
27. V.S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India: A Study in Historical Biographies*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966, pp. 27-28.
28. Romila Thapar, 'Historical Biographies', p. 506.
29. D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1956, p. 315, fn 1.
30. Agrawala was very close to Maithilisharan Gupta and was an admirer of Gupta's famous work *Bharat Bharati*. See, Agrawala's essay, "Sahitya-sadan ki yatra", in Agrawala, *Prithvi-putra*, pp. 90-97.

31. Mataprasad Gupta also edited a critical edition of *Padmavat* in 1952, which was published by Hindustani Academy.
32. V.S. Agrawala, *Padmavat [Malik Muhammad Jayasi krit Mahakavya] (Mul aur samjivani vyakhya)*, Jhansi: Sahitya-Sadan, 1955, pp. 42 ff.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
34. V.S. Agrawala, *Bharatiya Kala (Prarmbhik Yug se Tisari shati isavi tak)*, ed. Prithvikumar Agrawala, Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1966.
35. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Introduction to Indian Art*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1969 [1913], p. 79.
36. Agrawala, *Bharatiya Kala*, see, Introduction.