

THE GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO INDOLOGY

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Indology is a name given to the academic study of the history, languages and cultures of the Indian subcontinent. Other names for Indology are Indic studies or Indian studies or South Asian studies. Strictly speaking, it encompasses the study of the languages, scripts of all of Asia that was influenced by Indic culture. As one can imagine, this encompasses almost all of present day Asia except perhaps the very northern-most reaches of Siberia. Indology, as viewed by its practitioners in Europe and America, is analogous to Entomology - the science of insects, in more ways than one. In both instances, the subjects of the study have little say in the matter and the scope of the study. The study is always carried out for the benefit of the people who undertake the study and there is little or no benefit to the subject of the study who may end up sacrificing his life for the 'cause'. Indological studies or the study of the Indic people in a scholarly and serious manner can be broken up into 6 major categories in some cases with overlapping time periods.

1. Babylonian and Greek (2500 BCE to 150 BCE) : The Semitic and Mediterranean world had ubiquitous contacts with India. This came to a virtual stop during the Roman Empire when it became the paramount Mediterranean power after the fall of Carthage. Rome remained a major trading partner of India but ceased to be interested in Indic scholarship.
2. China and the Sino Civilization (2500 BCE – 1200 CE) : The interaction between India and Chinese civilizations has been one of long standing, reaching back to the ancient era, and it has been a two-way street, contrary to popular misconceptions. The interaction has been ubiquitous and consistent. There is much work yet to be done to study the extent of this interaction, an area that was merely of tertiary interest to the European.

3. Arab and Non-Arab Islamic studies of India (700 CE to 1200 CE) : Most of the Islamic savants who studied India did not speak Arabic as their native tongue, but were descended from converted central Asian and Indic civilizations. In fact, it can safely be said that the Arab savants had enormous respect for the capabilities of the Indics as did the Greeks like Pythagoras and Apollonius of Tyanneous before them. The glaring exception to this statement is the cognitive dissonance exhibited by Al Biruni, the most well-known amongst the Islamic Indologists, who spent a considerable portion of his life in India while expressing scathing contempt and stereotyping of Hindus in his remarks about Indians in general. That there is a contradiction between spending a great portion of one life learning from a people and then trashing them unequivocally does not seem to bother Al Biruni. This came to a halt after the sack of Baghdad and Damascus by Hulagu, the grandson of the Mongol Great Khan Chinghiz Khan, the most victorious conqueror of all time. It was also severely impacted when vast numbers of Indics were taken in slavery, especially able-bodied men and women, those with skills in the arts and sciences and equally large numbers were killed at the rate of 100,000 a day during and after a battle. So great were the numbers of Indian slaves who flooded the slave markets of Damascus that the price of slaves dropped dramatically and would seriously impact the economics of slavery as a profitable activity. Some have estimated the sustained decimation of the Indic population over the 5 centuries of Islamic domination of the subcontinent to be in the neighborhood of over 70 million people and for the first time, India, always a highly densely populated country in relative terms to the rest of the globe, suffered a drop in population. The scholars retreated farther and farther to the south until they reached Kerala, which is where the Kerala school of Astronomy and Mathematics flourished for at least 300 years, producing such stalwarts as Nilakanta Somayaji, till the 1700's.

4. Pre- British colonial Catholic Church dominated study of India. It may be surprising to learn that one of the first pioneers in European Indology was the 12th Century Pope, Honorius IV. Then, as now, the primary focus of the study was not the scientific acquisition of knowledge but to arm themselves with enough facts to be able to convert the Indics into Christianity.

5. British colonial Indology (1780 CE – 2000 CE) : British colonial Indology was in reality dominated by German scholars. Interest in Indology only took shape and concrete direction after the British came to India, with the advent of the discovery of Sanskrit by Sir William Jones in the 1770's. Political motivations have been always dominant in the pursuit of Indological studies during the colonial era, right from the outset since the time of Sir William Jones, when he discovered the existence of Sanskrit. One such political motivation was the need for the European to define his identity outside the framework of Semitic traditions which dominated the religious life of Europe. The notion that the North European Viking owed much of his civilization to the Mediterranean Semite was not palatable to most of the elite among the countries of Europe. So, the discovery of Sanskrit was accompanied by a big sigh of relief that the languages of Europe did not after all derive from Hebrew but from an ancestor language which was initially assumed to be Sanskrit. But as the European realized that the present day practitioners of Sanskrit were not blonde and blue-eyed (remember ideas of racial superiority were dominant in 18th century Europe) this was found to be equally unpalatable. The European Indologist therefore came upon the ingenious explanation that the Sanskritic culture of the subcontinent was not native to the subcontinent but was impregnated by a small band of nomadic Viking like marauders who then proceeded to transform themselves within the short space of 200 years into the intellectual class of India.

This hypothesis (because that is what it was) had of course no basis, but it served the purpose and killed several birds with one stone. It denied India the autochthonous legacy of the dominant culture of the subcontinent, and helped create a schism in the Indian body politic, and further implied that the native Indics were incapable of original thought and certainly were not capable of producing a language like Sanskrit. It filled the obsessive need that the European had for an ancestor that was not Semitic in origin. The ancestor did not come from India but from a long lost Shangri-la of whom there were no survivors (so that their hypothesis could never be contradicted). Thus was born the mythical Aryan, whose only qualification was that he should hail from a land that was anywhere but India, preferably from a region not very densely inhabited or conscious of their antiquity. Further, it gave the excuse for the British to claim that they were indeed the later day version of the Aryans destined to lord it over lesser, more unfortunate people by reason of the fact that they were Aryans. But the discovery of Sanskrit by Sir William Jones and the coming of the British had a terminally fatal effect on the conduct of scientific studies in India. It cut off the Indic from his own native source of traditional learning and replaced it with the traditions of a land far away with which he had no physical contact, and could not relate, with the result that literacy fell to 6% at the turn of the 20th century.

Education was tightly controlled by the government and all support to schools that did not teach English was summarily stopped, except in states that were ruled by a local Maharajah such as Travancore Cochin, Baroda and Mysore. India was turned into a vast Gulag where no ideas other than those of the British were allowed to penetrate and Indian were effectively barred from traveling to foreign lands, except on a one-way trip to a distant land as indentured labor, lest they return with the subversive notions of freedom and democracy which, as Churchill remarked on more than one occasion, were

not applicable to the subject populations of their Colonies. There was no money allocated for research and no encouragement of savants, who had little opportunity to pursue further research. So the steady supply of Indic scientists which lasted till about 1780 CE finally died out and Indic science was almost extinguished from the land. Till then the Indic was widely respected throughout the world and its geographical origin was synonymous with scholarship.

Today, it is commonplace in India to deride somebody who expresses pride in his tradition and his civilization as being jingoistic. So great was the change and so lasting was its effect that today vast numbers of Indian youth have almost the same opinion of India and Indian traditions that the Colonial overlords had of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. There has been a massive change in the psyche of the Indic, much of it for the worse, a fact that was brought out in vivid portrayals by V. S. Naipaul when he coined the phrase 'the wounded civilization'. The germ of such a vast change in psyche was the goal of Thomas Babington Macaulay. Even Max Muller, H.H. Wilson like people, who have contributed much to translation on many Indian works into English, were indeed, in their hearts and the letters they wrote to friends and minutes, presented made no secrets of their low opinion on Indian Holy works and Indian society.

6. Indic studies by native Indians (1900 CE to the present) : The Indic tradition miraculously resurrected itself shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century from an almost comatose condition. In the nineteenth century, the nationalism in India resurged. Many Indian and some foreign scholars produced works ascertaining the authenticity of Indian texts and authenticating the antiquity of Indian heritage. We can divide these texts into two groups:

i) those who wrote Indian version of explanation to Sastras. This group included many traditional Sanskrit scholars like R.G. Bandarkar, S.Kuppuswami Sastri, P.V.Kane, S.K.De, C. Kunhan Raja, V. Raghavan, T.N. Dharmadhikari, to mention a few.

ii) On the applied side, contemporary socio-economical and political problems were taken for study and the venue of study shifted to India. Discovery of Indus valley civilization, development of archaeology, epigraphy and numismatics helped many Indian historians to write books on Ancient and Medieval India. Study of Dravidian Language developed as a separate branch. Books written by Prof. Nilakanta Sastri, Hasre, D.C. Circar, Majumdar and host of others are note worthy.

Astrology was taken as an important tool for historical study and ascertaining the dates of major events in ancient Indian history. B.G. Tilak, Yukteshwar Yogi, David Frawley, Prof. Srinivasa Raghavan and many others tried to ascertain the dates of Lord Rama, Sri Krishna, Mahabharata war, Date of Buddha, Adi Sankara etc. Dr..N.Mahalingam organized many National seminars inviting scholars and gave them a much needed platform for scholarly discussions. During one such conference held in 1995, 43 Indian scholars after careful deliberations decided the date of Mahabharata war, which is now accepted by all.

Many books were written by scholars on Lord Krishna, Lord Rama, festivals of India, cultural practices, customs, women studies etc., on socio political themes. During this period some of the leading Universities in India produced Indian history and as class struggle and ethnic conflicts.

The post 1990 period is the period when Indological research shifted from Englishmen to Americans. They gave more importance to the theory of 'aesthetic dominance' of Brahmins and Kshatriya classes over other people. New chairs were

created in American Universities which fund and promote studies interpreting the class struggle in all classical texts.

Hence, history of Indology, to a great extent, is an interpretation of Indian history as interpreted to the social and political advantage of the Colonial masters, other Europeans and Macaulay's "brown sahibs."

Geographical approach to Indology

The Puranas have five components - creation of the Universe, secondary creation, Time scale, Description of major clans, and Genealogy of kings. Indological studies have another important branch where we study geographical information which is present in Ancient texts like Vedas, Puranas, epics, kavyas and many sastra literature. They provide information on geography of ancient world, flora, fauna, climate, minerals, trade, crafts, arts and architecture, and sciences. This being of no use to political advantage to Englishmen and would rather be a nuisance to them, they mostly ignored it. For the past hundred years, a group of scholars, mostly Indian, carefully chose the geographical aspects about the first three elements in Puranas.

Some the works fall under the major categories of:

1. Studies in Mahapuranas and Upa Puranas : The studies are available for Bhagavata Purana, Vayu Purana, Vamana Purana, and Agni Purana and a few more. They supply information on the society, flora, fauna, weapons mentioned in them and on special aspects present in them. They have also written on books on pilgrimages, vrta, dana, customs and rituals, mythology etc. present in a Purana.
2. Books on esoteric topics present in Puranas : Many books are written on Brahma, Siva, Visnu, Devi, other Gods in Puranas.
3. Books on Geography of the Indics : This is the most important category. However very few books are published under this category. This is important because, all

those who approach the Indology through historical or sociological perspective are scared to touch geography because in their approach, they first have a theory mostly without empirical evidence and build upon that theory as they are sure that they can sell it to the subordinate people in their colonies. Geographical approach includes excavations which would present a realistic picture of the extant civilizations that had originated and survived from time immemorial. Works like Orion of the East by Bala Gangadhara Tilak, Ancient world by Prof. Srinivasa Raghavan, Ancient Indian Historical Dates by Kota Venkatacalam, Ancient Indian History by Satya Samhita, Astronomical Dating of Ramayana by P.V. Vartik, Ancient Indian Historical dates by Kota Venkatacalam, Kala Nirnaya of Ravi Chandran, Ancient Indian Chronology by P. Gokhale, Chronology of Ancient India by Subash Kak, Dating of Ramayana by Pushkar Batnagar, Vaniyal Moolam Varalaru Kanpom by N. Ramadurai, Ancient World edited by Dr. N. Mahalingam are important. Moreover, innumerable articles are posted by enthusiastic educated men in internet.

The books written on the Ancient Geography of India are very few but are noteworthy.

A) Ancient India By Alexander Cunningham : Alexander Cunningham was a British Civil Servant during 19th Century. When he was laying a railway line between Karachi and Lahore, he was supplied with big bricks from an ancient historical site called "Brahminobad". Later, on excavation it turned out to be the Indus valley city of Harappa. He was appointed as the first Director General of Archeology. He wrote two books, one of which was *Ancient India*. In this book, based on the material available from Greek travelers Megesthenes, Aarian, Chinese travelers Fahien and Yuang Tsang, he has recreated ancient geography of India and adjoining regions. He has marked the

routes taken by the travelers, towns and places they have visited, the distances between the places. He has identified many ancient rivers, mountains and kingdoms. He has identified the modern names of many ancient cities or their approximate location.

B) *Geography of Ancient and Medieval India* By D.C.Sircar : He was a great Sanskrit as well as Pali scholar and hence he profusely quoted from Puranic and other texts in his book. He identifies the traditionally known 56 Desas, their people, rivers flowing there, the cities etc. He also discusses about locations mentioned in Puranas.

C) *Development of Geographical Ideas in Ancient India* by Prof. Maya Prasad Divari: He has made a scientific approach to the study of Puranas. Puranas contain a lot of valuable information of various geographical features. They also contain inaccuracies added over the passage of time. Maya Prasad carefully studied the Puranas and brought out salient features in the form of a book. The book, in 9 chapters, deals with Cosmology and Cosmogony, origin of continents and rocks, topography and geomorphologic features on earth, climatology, Oceanography, atmosphere and wind, the different Janapadas in India. It is a veritable compendium of information.

D) *Fine Arts & Technical Sciences in Ancient India* by Dr. Shiv Shankar Misra : This book is divided into 6 major sections, viz. music, architecture, painting, botany, zoology and veterinary science. These sections are subdivided into more than 100 chapters and extensively dealt with.

E) *Ancient India* by Majumdar : It is yet another good book on ancient India. The book deals with geography of ancient India, with special reference to different kingdoms that existed during Vedic and Puranic period. He identifies many mountains and rivers of ancient India. Different tribes are also identified.

F) *Geography of Puranas* by Dr. S.M. Ali : He was a Geography Professor first in Sagar University and then in Banaras Hindu University. This book is par excellence in

geographical approach. It was published in 1966 and even after 50 years, no new book of its stature has come. He was a scholar in Sanskrit, Urdu, Persian and Arabic. This gave him great insight while translating the passages. He has ably identified different Dvipas, oceans, mountains and rivers. He has given the present names of those rivers and mountains. He has supported his description with beautiful maps. He also identifies many Janapadas referred to in Puranas and Epics. He is able to establish that the geographical features referred to in Puranas have not changed and they are still identifiable.

G) Ancient Indian Historical Traditions by F.E. Pargiter : He too was an Englishman who was a civil servant in British Raj. In his book, he shows the consistency in genealogy of kings in many Puranas and strongly pleads that Puranas should be taken for writing Indian History. He also says Vedas are not intended as historical records and hence the practice of dividing Indian History into Rg. Vedic period, Later Veda Period, Epic period etc. is *malafide*. He also identifies ancient Janapadas, mountains and rivers.

H) The Lost River by Michale Domino : This is an excellent book on Sarasvati River and Sindhu - Saraswathi Civilization. He has used all modern evidences like aerial and satellite imagery, carbon-dating, archeological evidences and host of others. He has established that the 'Indus valley Civilisation' died of natural causes like change in climate and drying up of Sarasvati River some 2000 years before the so-called Aryan Invasion Period.

Significance of Geographical Approach

The sociological approach of Indology, as indicated earlier, is deductive approach. Here, they first form a theory in their mind with an ulterior motive. Then they collect statements favourable to their hypothesis only, carefully avoiding views

opposite to their theory. In this way they will take only a small portion of the work for their analysis. For example, the colour of a person (eg., Mahisha), the caste (eg., Sambuka), the social status (eg., Ekalavya), miracle (eg., Nandanar), region (eg., Ravana) and so on. They tend to apply contemporary Western moral code and value system in judging historical information. For them, the vast Indian literature on Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksa and various moral and ethical works, which had sustained the society within the nook and corner of the India, are of insignificant value. Hence the studies of this kind are full of inherent errors, misrepresenting and misleading people especially when they find a place in the text books of schools and colleges.

The geographical approach is, however, an inductive approach. Here we take the text in its totality. All available information is analyzed, interpolations identified and excluded from the study. This exclusion too is done after critical study of the book, by comparing copies from different parts of India. Modern value system is not applied while studying the personalities and contextual interpretation to events.

Then why many well-meaning Indian scholars are not taking up this type of approach and write many books? The reasons are many :

- 1) India is a vast country and people speak many languages. Hence, communication is difficult.
- 2) Vedas are unwritten and other holy texts are written either in Brahmi or Nagari script which are not known to common people. The compositions are in poetic form set in different metres and learning the inner meaning required the assistance of learned men.
- 3) Puranas and other Holy texts are to be learnt under traditional scholars only and their approach to the text is more esoterical and moral values than historical or social.
- 4) Due to passage of time, original books have been lost and new books contain errors.

- 5) Interpolations are also common in Puranas and Itihasas but traditional people are afraid to make corrections easily.
- 6) Lack of support from kings and society. The political turmoil in a country caused by fighting between kings, lack of learned kings to promote writing and reading the Puranas and Itihasas and propagate their messages to the public.
- 7) Displacement of people from their original lands. This happens due to many reasons:
 - a) invasion or frequent attack on a group may compel them to move towards another area which is safer.
 - b) new areas become politically and economically important and this results in wholesale movement of economic activities to a new area which affects the knowledge system of the people.
 - c) spread of new religions and cults which affect keeping the holy books and reading irrelevant and often impossible.
- 8) Invasion of Mohammedans : India has seen invasions from time immemorial from all the four directions. The Mongolian, Persian, Saka and periodic invasions from wild tribes from the West resulted merely in plundering or temporary occupation of small territories. Later, they got absorbed in larger Indian society. Mohammedan invasion has resulted in total destruction of land and its cultural features. Killing of learned men, burning of libraries, and vandalising the places of worship and cities and enslaving millions of people for slave trade and above all firmly entrenching in India with their religion has made a permanent scar on Indian society. With new rulers new languages come and the names of places also changed often partially and sometimes completely.
- 9) Geographical changes on land : Indian History covers a period of at least fifty thousand years. During such a long period of time changes in climate, topography,

rainfall, river systems and the like natural phenomena make people poor or move people outside is inevitable.

a) Famine: India is a monsoon-dependent country. Periodical floods and famines are common. There are ample records in Puranas and folklore about the 'the twelve year famine' phenomenon (The famine which starts in Dathu year in Vrccika rasi is said to be very serious- Tradition canonized the phenomenon through Nallathangal Story). Every year at least one-third of our country is subjected to different levels of famine. The Indus valley civilization slowly suffocated due to decrease of rainfall due to formation of El Nino Currents in Pacific.

b) Floods: Floods destroying cities is well known. Often they change their courses and towns lose their significance.

c) Changes in fluvial conditions: The rivers may go dry due to lack of rainfall for long period and after some time, water may flow once again. Puranas record that river Kaveri went dry at least four times. The legendary river Sarasvati is also a good example. River capture is again a phenomenon which affects the water flow. The Ganga River capturing Yamuna, the Sutlej and Beas River by Sindhu from Sarasvati caused the complete drying of Sarasvati at surface level but continue flow as 'Antarvahini'.

10) Jains and Buddhist texts also contain lot of information on geography of the land. Most of them are available in Pali language and not yet translated in other languages.

11) Lack of knowledge in science and geography on the part of traditional scholars and lack of Sanskrit Knowledge and colonial mind set of Indologists are impediment to proper study of information properly in Puranas and other Indian classical texts.

Conclusion

The above enumerated factors and many more have disturbed peace and prosperity of the land. Due to passage of time the details remain only in books and in traditions. Still, keeping in mind these factors we can reconstruct Ancient Geography of India fairly well. This alone will give the much required evidences to claim our antiquity and write a true Ancient Indian History.