

In Praise of Kings: Rajputs, Sultans and Poets in Fifteenth-century Gujarat

Aparna Kapadia

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Contemporary society's obsession with fixed categories and unwarranted binaries has resulted in numerous unwanted incidents and problematic interpretations of history. It has been observed that common citizens have not only fallen prey to narratives that defy historical logic, they have also been lured by deliberate mischievous insistence on the unchanging character of categories. Professional historians have for long challenged the problematic historicity of the binaries which are in contrast to the fluid and evolutionary character of various categories. However, despite these efforts, one notices an unfortunate disconnect with the larger society and its imaginations. Aparna Kapadia developing upon the rich and emerging historiography on the medieval and early modern period and the region of Gujarat makes an emphatic intervention to challenge the society's fixation with Rajputs as a timeless category. More importantly, Kapadia problematizes the religious binaries of the Hindu- kings and Muslim-sultans on one hand and linguistic binaries of the Hindu-Hindi/Sanskrit and Persian-Muslim/Sultanate on the other, during the fifteenth century in Gujarat. Another important contribution of this book lies in the author's efforts to showcase the geographical expanse of Sanskrit cosmopolitan culture and the corresponding reach of the Dingal literary traditions.

Regional histories more often than not have been dynasty-centric. Moreover, there has been a greater emphasis either on Persian chronicles or on archival sources and this has been reflected in the unfortunate marginalization of literary evidences available in other languages, be it cosmopolitan Sanskrit or vernacular dialects of the early modern era. (p.73) Aparna Kapadia

without undermining the significance of histories available in the Persian sources argues that more comprehensive picture of literary culture can be documented if sources in other languages are also examined. To substantiate her argument this monograph engages with five important non-Persian sources: *Ranmallachanda* a fifteenth century literary work partially composed in Sanskrit and partially in Dingal; *Gangadasapratapavilasanataka*, a play in nine acts that makes use of both prose and poetry and is composed primarily in Sanskrit but the Sanskrit is interspersed with a form of Prakrit, a style used traditionally in Sanskrit classical drama by the court jester (*Vidusaka*) and female characters; *Mandalikanrparcarita*, a Sanskrit epic poem in ten *sargas*, or chapters, composed as a traditional *carita* or biographical eulogy; *Rajavinoda* also known as *Srimahamudaturanacarita*, an epic poem/*mahakavya* written in Sanskrit; and finally *Rasa Mala* written by Forbes in the tradition of James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. Except *Rasa Mala*, which is nineteenth century text, all other are fifteenth century texts.

Reflecting on the regional influences on the literary traditions of Sanskrit, the author makes a couple of important observations, opining that 'In *Ranmallachanda*, its Brahmin poet displays his knowledge of classical Sanskrit with the opening verse but compose the bulk of his work in the oral tradition of Dingal *virakavya*, the heroic poetry that was gaining popularity and prestige in western India among warrior class.' (p.48). Not only Sufi saints borrowed from local-regional traditions and weaved them into their *masnavis* to expand their reach, even Sanskrit cosmopolitan tradition was always mediated by local traditions. Similarly, 'in the absence of an illustrious lineage or an army as strong and powerful

as the sultan's, Ranmal, the sole defender of his fort, must display his own prowess as a great warrior.' (p.64). Thus cosmopolitan Sanskrit had to adapt to the local conditions, rather than highlighting the genealogical emphasis upon heroic deeds. To the extent that: 'In this unusual representation, the narrative overturns the traditional *deva-asura* or god-demon dichotomy. It was indeed conventional to describe the Muslim enemies as demons or *asuras* in the Indic literary traditions of the time. The representation of the protagonist as Ravana, an *asura* in the epic tradition however, appears to turn the traditional rivalry on its head. Here the poet only seems to evoke the demon king in his aspect as a warrior hero.' (p.66).

By offering critical engagements with *Rajavinoda* or *Srimahamudasuratanacarita*, Aparna Kapadia succeeds in her efforts to expose the limitations of unfounded binaries. Quite similar to but in a role reversal when compared with the Vijayanagara rulers who portrayed themselves as 'Sultan among Hindu Kings', this 'epic poem or *mahakavya* presents him (Sultan Mahmud Begada) as a paramount or universal ruler with links to a prestigious solar dynasty, or *suryavamsa*, a link traditionally claimed by the Kshatriya kings of the subcontinent.' (p.104). Furthermore, she points out that though Sultans of Gujarat 'From the inception of their reign...had patronized Arabic and Persian, consciously linking themselves to a wider cosmopolitan literary world within and beyond the subcontinent', (p.110) we find that 'Sanskrit inscriptions from north India, and particularly from Gujarat testify to the fact that the language continued to be in use after the establishment of Muslim rule in India'. (p.111) Irrelevance of religious binary could be seen when the Sultan of Gujarat was forced to withdraw his siege of 'Hindu' fortress Champaner due to the presence of the Sultan of Mandapa/Malwa (p.85). Further, the author has emphatically pointed out the cultural borrowings, between the so-called 'Indic' and 'Islamicate' traditions, otherwise celebrated for the Mughal period, to be quite prevalent during the fifteenth century in this region.

As pointed out above, this book critically highlights the fallacies of a single specific 'Rajput' identity, as we understand today. The research engages with the

evolutionary processes, which led to the consolidation of the Rajput identities. The author critically examines Forbes' *Ras Mala* and suggests that 'Here, the Rajputs, are akin to the open-ended social category that constituted the military labour market in which marriage alliances and military service propelled the rise in status of these upwardly mobile groups. Furthermore, in this view, the Rajputs and Sultans are not always at odds but in fact part of the evolving system of patronage in the fifteenth century.' (p.156)

While appreciative of most of the formulations suggested by author, let me share some of my reservations, which emanate not so much out of criticism but more out of my apprehensions about the potential misuse of certain analytical categories. The historians continuously face the dilemma of relying on categories to define the specific. Categorization as a process is exclusionary, creating problems for historians who deal more with the continuities and less with ruptures and changes. For instance, the use of the term 'Indic' can be a double-edged sword. While the author makes earnest efforts to highlight the long-term continuities and challenge the binaries of religion, language and associated characterizations, the use of 'Indic' in the book unfortunately tends to reiterate the binaries. What makes a language or culture 'Indic'? When are we going to call a group Indic? How much time do we need to call a period Indic? Where will we place Urdu?

There are some typographical mistakes, which are regrettable, especially on the part of the publishers. However, such mistakes cannot undermine the contribution of the monograph. This monograph goes beyond simplistic explanations and points out the complexities involved in examining the socio-cultural-linguistic dynamics of the region. The significance of the monograph can be summarized as "The collection of narratives brought together in this reflects crucial aspects of the ways in which the warrior ethos and identities were creatively developing, but had not entirely become set in stone, in the fifteenth-century milieu' (p.11). This book will interest specialists of social and cultural histories of South Asia during the early modern period.