

Witnessing History : The *Kalika* *Purana* Examined

Mignonette Momin

The study and writing of 'ancient history' the world over is strongly influenced by the tendency to invariably connect – directly or indirectly – any past happening in a particular area with the 'greater' tradition of its origin, which is ostensibly more preeminent than the 'smaller' traditions. Thus, for instance, the traditions of the Greeks, Romans and Hebrews were considered substantially more important than those of others in European history, if only because the former were recognized as the 'fathers' of the latter's history.² In India, much of her history adheres to the Brahmanical tradition whose beginnings have been traced to the Indus-Ganga plains of Northern India.³ Thus, the emanation of human achievements in various parts of India, ascribed to their preliterate and literate period, is measured on the scale of that 'greater' tradition, which alone can supposedly unravel – or lend credibility to – the history of any region within the subcontinent. This 'greater' tradition had the advantage of referring, from time to time, to contemporaneous supplementary, complementary, and more or less equally important traditions (like those of the Buddhists and the Jains)⁴ to back the 'historicity' of many of the events it recorded in written form. The evidence of such literary sources, as well as that of inscriptions and other archaeological finds, often 'fortified' whatever the 'greater' tradition recorded, thus ensuring its formidable worth as the historian's raw material.

The grip of the 'greater' Brahmanical tradition on historical writing in ancient India was strengthened as a result of its intricate relationship with the 'regional' traditions, most of which were themselves branches of the former. On the flip side, the 'regional' traditions were apparently rooted in popular beliefs and pre-Brahmanical ideas, which were but reoriented to conform to the requisites of the Brahmanical tradition. Themes from local traditions were worked into the 'greater' tradition, eventually reflecting the substance of the so-called collective consciousness in 'pan-Indian' Brahmanical terms, as exemplified by the episodic matter contained in the *Mahabharata* and, to a lesser extent, in the *Ramayana*.⁵ Such themes, moreover, were borrowed in contemporaneous and later literature, embellished and preserved as historical tradition in the

Puranas (Brahmanical) and the *Vamsas* (Buddhist). The contents of these literary traditions were unmistakably interwoven with strands of myths and legends characteristic of specific regions.

Paradoxically, all tradition is man-made. It has survived over long periods of time, only because people as a community (or, at least, those who mattered in that community) wanted to remember certain events, acts, rites and symbols they deemed important enough to hand down that knowledge – by means of retelling or rewriting – from one generation to another. In Northeast India too, there are two types of traditions : oral and literary. The oral tradition is predominant in the hills and among neoliterate communities of the plains. The literary tradition, which is a ‘refined’ version of preceding oral tradition mixed with borrowed matter derived from the Indian mainland, prevails among large sections of the ‘Sanskritised’ or Brahmanically acculturated population of the plains.

It is the latter type of tradition that this paper aims at dealing with. The focus of discussion is the *Kalika Purana*, which, without doubt, is the earliest known literary text composed in the Lauhitya region. This paper intends to find out the motives behind the composition of this *Purana*, considering that it was part of the ‘greater’ Brahmanical tradition. For this purpose, the first step is to ascertain the contents of the text, and then examine the underlying themes. The final step is to assess the historical value of the evidence of this literary source.

Before getting down to this task, however, a few points need to be brought out, so as to sketch the history of the ‘pan-Indian’ Puranic tradition and to establish its relationship with the *Kalika Purana*. The *Puranas* stood for ancient legends or tales of olden times, the term *Purana* meaning ‘Old’. They both preceded and succeeded the epic poems, and were distinguished from the latter in the sort of topics brought under discussion.⁶ The epics treat the legendary actions of heroes as mortal men, whereas the *Puranas* focus on the powers and works of gods and goddesses that made or unmade the legendary figures. In any case both were sources of the historical tradition reflective of the attempt to link the relationships between various communities and land under their occupation with the legendary figures whose antecedents were ascribed to remote times. Some of the earlier *Puranas* contain valuable information on the form of Brahmanical belief which came next in order to that of the *Vedas*. The increasingly non-orthodox post-Vedic beliefs – comprising survivals of older, pre-Brahmanical beliefs and contemporaneous

Brahmanical beliefs – and their growing popularity in the succeeding centuries were well evidenced by the time of Alexander's invasion of India.⁷ Scholars attributed this phenomenon to the grafting of hero-worship on the preceding, simpler Vedic ritual. But this gave only a partial explanation of the development. The fact was that the hold and gradual diffusion of Brahmanical culture depended on the support it was able to garner from broader base, as the material culture typical of the Vedic period had undergone a revolutionary change by the close of that period. This change had far-reaching social-political implications as well. It bred new social elements that drew on the wealth offered by wet rice cultivation, commodity production and trade to acquire economic power and trigger problems of social structure and political organization. The orthodox Vedic beliefs, which had turned increasingly ritual-oriented and exclusive (as even the recitation of the Vedic texts could be heard only by members of the three higher *varnas*), were no longer socially relevant by post-Vedic times. Non-Vedic beliefs and changing social values contributed to the assertion of ever growing *varna* / tribal / territorial identities and new socio-religious outlook; and these had to be absorbed in the Brahmanical tradition, to make it acceptable to larger sections of the population. The epics and the Puranas seem to have fulfilled that need to some extent. The sectarian interpolation or embellishment particularly typical of the *Puranas* from the late Gupta period onwards indicates that they belong to the corpus of religious literature representing a more extravagant development of neo-Brahmanical tradition. It appears that this tradition had gradually found acceptance among the populace of the greater Brahmanical society, which, by that period covered even certain peripheral areas beyond the Gangetic basin. In fact, most of the *Puranas* are scriptures of neo-Brahmanism especially pertaining to that stage of Brahmanical religion in which faith in a particular divinity is the prevailing principle. Nonetheless, pantheism is an important feature of the *Puranas* and underlies their whole teaching. The specific divinity that is the focus of a *Purana* is diversified according to its individual sectarian bias. By post-Gupta times, and especially by the post-ninth century, certain *Puranas* had taken on the character of regional traditions, supplementing the eighteen *Maha* (main) *Puranas*. Such supplementary / subordinate works belonging to the Puranic tradition are the *Upapuranas*, eighteen in number.⁸ The *Kalika Purana* is one of them.

According to H.H. Wilson, the *Kalika Purana* contains about 9000 stanzas in 98 chapters.⁹ However, there is no absolute concurrence on this estimate.¹⁰ As the title of this *Purana* indicates, the work is dedicated

to recommend the worship of the goddess Kali or Kalika, 'the black'. It happens to be the only work of the series of *Upapuranas* to have been composed for that purpose. The goddess Kali is a fearsome form of Devi, depicted in the main Puranic tradition as Siva's wife. Devi was worshipped in the Kamarupa-tirtha (=place of pilgrimage, corresponding to the western part of Assam) as Kamakshi or 'wanton-eyed' and Kamakhya, "called by the name of Kama, desire." The very first pages of the *Kalika Purana* are given to narrating the story of Brahma's incestuous passion for his daughter, Sandhya. Then it relates the marriage of Siva and Sati (the sage Daksa's daughter); Daksa's arrangements for a great sacrifice to which all, barring Siva and Sati, were invited; Sati's immolation in Daksa's sacrificial fire, in deep grief over her father's insult to her and Siva; the devastated Siva's carrying his wife's corpse about the eastern part of the world until Brahma, Vishnu and Sanaiscara entered it and dismembered it into fragments; and the origin of the *Pithasthanas* or places on earth where different parts of Sati's body were scattered, and where *lingas* (phallic emblems) and *yonis* (female symbols) were consequently set up. In fact, this literary text identified Kamarupa as the *mahapitha* of the cult of the goddess whose female organ fell on the Kama-giri (i.e. the Nilakuta). The goddess was worshipped in the land as Kamakhya. The land that Siva traversed carrying Sati's body henceforth came to be known as *pracyesu yajniko desah* or the sacrificial country in the east. The *Kalika Purana* gives details of the rites and formulae of which the worship of Kamakhya consists, including those on sanguinary sacrifices. It describes the origin of as many as 1008 kinds of sacrificial ritual. This part of the narrative speaks of the births of Bhairava and Vetala, both of whom were devoted to the different forms of Devi. It describes several rivers and mountains / hills at Kamarupa-tirtha, hallowed by the temple of the goddess. On that basis, scholars have identified the western part of the Brahmaputra valley as the source from which the Tantric version of Puranic religion proceeded to other places.¹¹

The narrative then shifts to the birth, growth and death of Naraka, the legendary founder of the Bhauma dynasty in Kamarupa. Varaha (the Boar incarnation of Visnu) had begotten him on Bhumi (the Earth) during the period of her impurity. Bhumi had to bear the child in her womb for the entire duration of the Satya-yuga and the first half of the Tetra-yuga till such such time that Visnu (in the incarnation of Rama) succeeded in killing Ravana. It was during that time that Janaka, ruler of Videha, desirous of a son, instituted a sacrifice at which Gautama and his son Satananda officiated as priests. Thereafter the sacrificial ground (*yajna-bhumau*)

yielded Sita through a furrow that Janaka had ploughed as per Narada's advice. Bhumi appeared before Janaka, told him about the impending delivery of her own son at the same sacrificial ground, and extracted a promise from him that he would raise the boy until he attained maturity. When eventually Ravana was killed, Bhumi gave birth to her son at the place of sacrifice and informed Janaka about it. Janaka found the child lying on a human skull and told Gautama about it. Thus Gautama gave the child the name Naraka. On Janaka's instructions Gautama performed the *kesavapana* ceremony to admit Naraka to the rank of a Ksatriya. Janaka brought Naraka up as a true prince with the help of Bhumi (who was disguised as a nurse named Katyayani). When Naraka had reached the age of sixteen, Bhumi told him the truth about his birth. Thereafter Visnu appeared and took Naraka and Bhumi through the waters of the Ganga to Pragjyotisapura in the middle of Kamarupa. Its presiding deity was Kamakhya and its protector was Siva. The Kiratas inhabited the land. They looked like golden pillars, were devoid of knowledge, had shaved heads, and were solely bent on taking wine and meat.¹²

On Visnu's order Naraka fought against their ruler, Ghataka, and killed him. He brought the bulk of the Kiratas to submission and drove out the rest (who refused to acknowledge him as ruler) to the eastern seashore. Thereafter Visnu crowned Naraka king of Pragjyotisa, which land was so called because Brahma created the eastern star by residing in it.¹³ The kingdom stretched from the eastern side of the river Karatoya to the Lalitakanta on the west. It was hallowed by the presence of Mahamaya Yoga-nidra in the form of Kamakhya, whom Vishnu made the presiding deity. Visnu settled many *dvijas* (i.e. Brahmanas), sages and members of the four *varnas* in the land and made it fit for Vedic study and donations. The narrative then related Naraka's marriage to Maya, daughter of the king of Vidarbha; the kingdom's prosperity under Naraka's just rule with proper attention to Visnu's instructions; Naraka's disrespect to the *dvijas*, Visnu and Kamakhya under the influence of Bana, ruler of Sonitapura, and his disregard for sacrifices and donations; finally, the death of Naraka at the hands of Krsna and the installation of Bhagadatta on the throne. The remaining portions of the narrative are concerned with further stories about Kali in connection with other Brahmanical deities, about various forms of Devi worship, Tripura worship, *bali-dana*, Visnu and Siva worship, about the Lauhitya and other geographical locations, norms of conduct for kings, Sudras, etc. The broad division of society into the *dvija* and the Sudra was in tune with the later Puranic tradition of 'vindicating' the development of a hierarchical social order based on *varna* ideals upheld in the 'greater' Brahmanical tradition.

As is evident from the contents mentioned above, the *Kalika Purana* belongs to the Sakta modification of neo-Brahmanical belief, or the worship of the female powers of the deities. The theme of the *Kalika Purana* is, therefore, theogony. It is the authority on Saktism, which Brahmanical sect coexisted with Vaisnavism and Saivism.¹⁴ The deities of these three main Brahmanical sects had each become important or / and supreme in the belief of their respective followers especially by the post-Gupta period, although their antecedents could be traced back to earlier times. The religious developments, in turn, were reflective of certain changes that were taking place in the means and relations of production. These developments were tied up with the emergence and growth of the monarchical system reflective of the congenial atmosphere that met the socio-economic needs of the handful that mattered among the communities of the Brahmaputra valley. The personages in question happened to belong to the ruling groups within the *varna*-based order, which order, in turn, was intertwined with the rise of Brahmana elements in Kamarupa.¹⁵ No wonder, then, that the theogonical theme was interconnected with aspects of the dynastic history of the kingdom. As was characteristic of Puranic tradition pertaining to areas that had hardly any depth of the ideals of *varna-dharma*, the *Kalika Purana* sought to legitimize the claims of a particular 'ruling' line to establish its hold over the Lauhitya region, by fabricating the semi-divine origins of its founder, Naraka. The genealogy of the Bhauma family was thus traced to Naraka, followed by Bhagadatta, and this was recorded in the inscriptions of the historical rulers. In their records the name of Vajradatta was added to the list of legendary rulers, indicating incorporation of other local legendary figures not included in the Puranic tradition, but obviously considered significant by the historical rulers. On its part, the *Kalika Purana* drew on the references that some of the main *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata* had made to Naraka and Bhagadatta, to provide a 'historical' basis for the rise of the Bhauma dynasty in Kamarupa.¹⁶ Apart from local inscriptions, the *Harsacarita*, the accounts of Yuan Chwang and certain literary and epigraphical records of the contemporaneous rulers corroborated the genealogical table of the pre-Ahom rulers. Needless to say, the genealogy provided the handle for the rulers of Kamarupa to justify their membership of a ruling family whose antiquity and 'Ksatriya' antecedents were beyond doubt in the 'pan-Indian' Brahmanical context.

The *Kalika Purana* therefore reflected the circumstances of recording and validating various institutions that emerged in the Lauhitya region from the Brahmanical perspective. To that extent it embodied the founda-

tion of a regional tradition with Kamarupa as its focus. As a component of the *Sakta Upapuranas* it has a wealth of information on Sakta ideology and iconography, which material can be used to compare and contrast the levels of sectarian developments within the region, on the one hand, and between the region and other parts of India during Gupta and post-Gupta times, on the other. This is because it contains valuable material derived from the corpus of literature ascribed to that broad period, even though the text, as it has survived in its present form, assumed its final shape only in about the tenth century A.D.¹⁷ The account of Naraka and his descendants, although far less impressive than the genealogical lists and narration of the deeds and valour of heroic figures of the *Mahapuranas* (under *Vamsanucarita*, *vamsa* and *manvantara*, which latter two are missing in the *Kalika Purana*), nevertheless offers scope for inquiry into the emergence and nature of kingship in Kamarupa, and the social context of the rise of the regional concept. More importantly, the text gives glimpses of the material conditions in the descriptions of rituals, places and other geographical features. If the evidence of this literary work is combined with that of the inscriptions and other types of archaeological remains, the possibilities of promoting the history of Kamarupa will increase further.

Notes and References

1. The expression 'ancient history' carries a broad socio-economic connotation. It stands for that period of history when human beings had learnt how to organize resources generally based on the pre-feudal mode of production.
2. For a concise discussion on this matter, see, among others, V. Ehrenberg, *Man, State and Deity Essays in Ancient History* (Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1974), pp.2-18.
3. At least, this is the trend that underlies extant writings on both Indian history and regional histories pertaining to the ancient and early medieval period, irrespective of the intellectual climate in which the writings were produced. Invariably the regional histories' Vedic and neo-Brahmanical connections were sought to be established, often motivated by the writers' ideological leanings.
4. Most writers of regional histories tended to push back the antiquity of the regional identities to the remotest times possible, to the post-Vedic- if not to the Vedic – period. They tried to locate the evidence in the sources of that period.

5. The reference point in the *Mahabharata* was the Kuruksetra battle. The legendary progenitors (or the progenitors' immediate successors) of the historical rulers of regional dynasties were assigned roles in that grand scheme, on the side of either the Kauravas or the Pandavas. As for the evidence of the *Ramayana*, Rama's encounter with people and places in the course of his wanderings during the period of his exile, served as the reference point to 'prove' their identities.
6. See F.E.Pargiter, *The Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, (London, 1922); R.C.Hazra, *Studies in Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs* (2nd edn. Delhi, 1975). For perceptive insights into the history of the Brahmanical tradition, see Romila thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History Some Interpretations* (New Delhi, 1978), pp.211-360.
7. Drawing on the evidence of Megasthenes's *Indica*, Graeco-Roman writers mentioned the prevalence of the worship of Herakles (Krsna?) in the Indus basin and that of Dionysos (Indra?) in the adjoining hills. D.D.Kosambi (in *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, 2nd reprint, Delhi, 1975, p.117) was the first of the history writers to have made this point.
8. The credit for the most detailed study on these literary texts goes to R.C.Hazra, *Studies in the Upapuranas, Vols. I-II* (Calcutta, 1958, 1963). For the purpose of this paper, Vol.II is most relevant, especially pp.194-258.
9. H.H.Wilson, Preface to his translation of the *Vishnu Purana*, p.lxxxix.Cf. *Kalika Purana* (Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Banaras, 1953).
10. See R.C.Hazra, *op. cit.*, p.195,421n.
11. H.H.Wilson in *Asiatic Researches, Vol. V*
12. For this translation see R.C.Hazra, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
13. *Ibid.*, p.208.
14. These developments have been mentioned (though in passing) elsewhere : See Mignonette Momin, "Rethinking Varnasramadharm in Kamarupa", in *Proceedings of North East India History Association* (hereafter *PNEIHA*), Vol. XXI (2001); *idem*, "Contextualizing Origin Myths of North East India" in *ibid.*, Vol. XXII (2002), Section II.
15. *Supra*, 14n.
16. Mignonette Momin, in *PNEIHA*, Vol. XXI, p.23, 7n.
17. J.C.Roy, in *Bharatavarsa*, Vol. XVII, Part ii, p.677. For details on the dating of the *Kalika Purana*, see R.C. Hazra, *op. cit.*, pp.243-257.