

## BOOKS in review

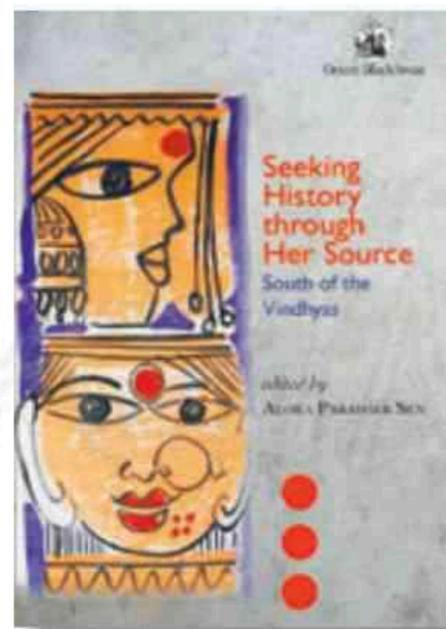
# The fragment in history

The book seeks to foreground the small, the stray, the unextraordinary, the neglected pieces of evidence in the history writing of early India. BY SHONALEEKA KAUL

**S**EEKING *History Through Her Source* is a slim, tastefully produced collection of eight essays written by emerging young scholars. The editor of the volume, Aloka Parasher Sen, says in the preface that seven of the contributors were her research students over the years at the University of Hyderabad.

As such, they seem to have shared in the vision and enterprise that this work seeks to represent. Let this not lead readers, however, to assume a homogeneity of enquiries or perspectives here. Quite the contrary. This book presents a broad and inclusive variety of historical sources from narrative literature (in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Prakrit) to epigraphs, coins, and art remains.

The themes investigated are avowedly all within the purview of the early history of “South of the Vindhyas”. Yet they occupy a wide range too: From the idea of water in Sangam literature (Sreekala M.V.) to that of the forest in *kavya* texts (Mrinalini); the representation of marginalised groups in the Jatakas (Sagnik Saha; why are the Jata-



## Seeking History through Her Source South of the Vindhyas

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kas deemed to be only south of the Vindhyas, though?) to that of ruling groups in Deccan coins (Kasala Jashwanth Prasad); and the local and the pan-Indic in Chalukyan prashastis (inscriptional eulogies; Aruna Pariti), on the one hand, to the unique meanings of stray art objects (Parasher Sen), on the other; and so on.

The essays have been divided into two sections: one on literature called “Perceiving the Past” and one on material sources called “Producing the Past”. While this is a creative classification, it is worth remembering that texts produced the past as much as material objects

did and archaeological evidence entails perception as much as literary images do.

### WAYS OF READING

To those aware of advances in the early Indian history-writing of the last few decades, it will be apparent that the ambit of these essays individually has a sense of familiarity attached to it. As the introduction to the volume admits, each of these sources has been worked upon extensively before and so have, for the most part, the questions raised by the studies in this book. One is thinking of the writings of the likes of B.D. Chattopadhyaya (on forests and the state), Shel-

don Pollock (on *prashastis* and kingship), Uma Chakravarti (on the Jatakas), Parasher Sen herself (on subordinate groups), and, indeed, the author of this review (on spaces in *kavyas*).

While the contributors are cognisant of this prior work, not all of them engage with it methodologically. For example, the essay on forests in two *kavyas*, the *Harshacharita* and *Kiratarjuniya*, invokes the work of several scholars who moved beyond simplistic “factual” uses of literary descriptions to deeper, symbolic, and hermeneutic interpretations of *kavya* for history.

The lucid essay also rightly acknowledges that there are grounds for debate on whether such imaginative texts ought to be used without nuance to merely mine “direct information” on antiquity sans a consideration of generic exigencies. Yet the author succumbs to the temptation of falling back on an essentially literal reading of the texts to “produce information about the past” (p. 91). This jars somewhat with the air of doing something fresh that otherwise justifiably hangs about this book.

In contrast, the essay on hydraulic representations in Sangam poetry is more alive to the fact that creative compositions always exceed the empirical and that the real strength of literature lies precisely in giving one access to the realm of the intuitive, the subjective, and the multi-valent.

The contributor thus

fascinatingly observes: “Water was not just a commercial ... resource, but a collective responsibility and an idea.... Water in the early Tamil imagination was a source of income, a channel for trade, destroyer of lands, and a mystery that hid their homeland and textual treasures. The various manifestations of how an important life-giving resource like water was visualised, used and imagined by the poets ... is a valuable way to remember that humankind has always been intrinsically related to the vagaries or plenitude of water ... its fear and its mystery, and... the impossibility of life without it.” (p. 119)

Incidentally, the other essay on Sangam literature in the volume (V. Rajesh), which unravels the making of the classical corpus through an analysis of heretofore ignored manuscripts, also demonstrates the complexity of literary “sources” and the corresponding need for interpretive thoroughness and care.

**CLOSE ATTENTION TO DETAIL**

Generally speaking, these are times of diminishing academic standards and writing skills. It is therefore a matter of relief and pleasure to find that practically all the pieces in this volume are well written,

The critique the book mounts against grand narratives and totalitarian versions is in fact universal in its relevance.

displaying tight prose and clear argumentation. This helps bring out the other outstanding quality of this collection, namely, the close attention to detail. The second section based on coins and inscriptions in particular includes some painstaking examination of the sources.

A good example of this is the chapter on short or fragmentary, early Deccan donative inscriptions from

sites such as Pitalkhora, Kanheri, and Amravati (Nairita Ghosh). The categories of analysis used, such as gender, kinship group, and occupational profile of the men and women who appear in these epigraphs, are, again, all inspired by preceding works of a similar kind by other scholars at other sites such as Sanchi. However, some bold and interesting conclusions ensue



ARUNANGSU ROY CHOWDHURY

**A CAVE AT KANHERI**, located deep inside the Sanjay Gandhi National Reserve Forest in Mumbai, a 2016 picture. The chapter on short or fragmentary, early Deccan donative inscriptions from sites such as Pitalkhora, Kanheri, and Amravati is a good example of the close attention to detail the essays in this collection exhibit.

this time. The author confidently contests the influential scholarly assumption that *varna* and *jati* were all-encompassing determinants of social identity in early India. On the basis of her sources, she shows that “what we see here is that instead of the practice of the caste system, these inscriptions reflected the class element of all major social groups, rarely mentioning their position in the caste hierarchy”. (p. 145)

She also asserts that as opposed to the scholarly picture of penury painted for humble artisanal groups such as carpenters and garland makers, “these groups had sufficient funds to make notable donations”. Indeed, the author flags the startling social fluidity on the basis of a reference to a leather worker who claimed to have been the son of a pandit/teacher (*upajhaya*).

The author maturely concludes with the following words: “Thus, we see how social reality... can be distinguished more specifically from these inscriptions... they highlight a very lively social scene without mentioning the ritual positioning and disparities... [and they] highlight the particularity of the social landscape of the Deccan in the early historic period.” (pp. 146-49)

#### FROM SINGULAR TO MULTIVOCAL

Proceeding in a similar vein is the last essay in this volume, which deals with three random samples of early historic art, namely, an ivory statuette from the ancient Deccan that



**SOME COINS** of ancient south India. The second section of *Seeking History through Her Source* is based on coins and inscriptions and includes some painstaking examination of sources.

showed up in Pompeii, Italy; an auspicious vase (*puṛṇaghata*) with only a label inscription as context; and a sculpture panel of Chenchu Lakshmi.

In the run-up to exploring these, the author, Parasher Sen, explicitly wishes to challenge what she calls “the methodological avenues unleashed by Indological discourse” that have “strangled” the study of early India. She refers here to the “essences” such as caste and religion to which influential scholarship has reduced the knowledge of ancient India (pp. 207-08).

This is a rare, strong admission from any Indian historian. It challenges both the authority of received, canonised wisdom within the discipline and the hegemony of certain sources or rather of

the vantages brought to bear upon them. Further, seeking to set up a salutary contrast, the author urges people to look instead at the history of localities and their traditions known through small and often fragmentary pieces of evidence. Such traditions, the author argues, would be representative of “marginalised social and regional groups that asserted a difference from and yet [were] linked to a larger whole”.

This suddenly puts the entire volume and all its disparate essays in perspective. This is indeed the moving force behind *Seeking History through Her Source*. As the introduction to the volume reiterates, its aim is to recover the fragment in history—in other words, to foreground the small, the stray, the unextraordinary,

the neglected—in terms of both sources and the places from which they hail.

Hence, the focus on “south of the Vindhyas”, which is deemed by some to be underrepresented in the historical narrative. Hence also the emphasis in this book on studying the portrayal of forests rather than, say, cities, or on positing the “realistic” perspective of inscriptions against that of prescriptive high texts, or the preference for reclaiming the authenticity of mythical narratives and not only official or objective ones.

#### SHIFT IN VALUATION

Although not exemplified uniformly across all chapters, the primary theoretical contribution of this book is doubtless this shift in valuation that it urges from the classical to the commonplace, from the mainstream to the localised, or from the “singular voice of history to one that is multivocal” (p. 2).

Even as it argues for appreciating history in all its local particularities, the critique that *Seeking History through Her Source* mounts against grand narratives and totalitarian versions is in fact universal in its relevance. For, not only the Deccan but so many other regions across India and so many testimonies, both oral and textual, both in Sanskrit and in the vernaculars, still await with hope the professional historian’s gaze to rescue them from oblivion. □

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