

Prominent Bramhan communities in Western India

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Prominent bramhan communities in Western India from the 17th through the 19th century were: the Sarasvats (Gaud Saraswat Bramhan - GSB), the Chitpavan, the Karhades and the Deshasths. Their identities were shaped in relation to each other. At the heart of the complex interplay between them was a conflict arising from the attempt of each community to assert its supremacy over the others. We shall examine certain narratives that reflect these conflicts and the contending identities arising from them. The 'Sahyadrikhand' is the most significant, from among all these narratives; it contains the earliest signs of the intense rivalry among these groups; the controversy that this narrative generated and the influence it wielded on later discourse remains unmatched. Its portrayals of the Chitpavan, Karhade, Sarasvat, and Deshastha communities never failed to incite controversy in the narratives which followed, making it their primary point of reference. However important 'Sahyadrikhand' may be to the bramhan politics of western India from 17th to the 19th century, we do not possess a reliable critical edition of this important text; we have two inadequate editions which are our only means of access to the text. Gerson Da Cunha published the first critical edition of 'Sahyadrikhand' in 1877. According to the editor, the critical edition was based on 14 manuscripts found in various parts of India (mostly Western India, with several other manuscripts found in the possession of various 'gentlemen in Bombay' - presumably Saraswat bramhans). This edition is far from satisfactory and leaves much scope for improvement in grammar and the ordering of sections. Levitt (1977) has noted various problems with the Da Cunha edition, remarking that the omission of multiple manuscripts by the editor has resulted in serious inconsistencies of ordering and content.



Obviously, the edition was part of the Sarasvat propaganda. Levitt's study surveys a number of manuscripts claiming to be a part of the 'Sahyadrikhand' and points out the complexities involved in the task of compiling a critical edition: he maintains that different sections of the 'Sahyadrikhand' may have come from different sources or may have come from different sections of the same source; he also argues that the text as we have it may have been extremely corrupt by the time it was identified as the 'Sahyadrikhand'. Ninety-four years after the publication of the Da Cunha's edition, Sarasvat grammarian Gajanan Gaitonde published an extended edition of 'Sahyadrikhand' in 1971. Gaitonde reasoned that the original edition had become extremely rare and contained a number of grammatical errors which necessitated another edition. He consulted various manuscripts that the earlier edition had skipped over and incorporated some

material from them. Though the new and improved edition is better than the earlier edition, it is still incomplete and omits a large portion from the earlier edition. It also includes the Marathi translation, making it more accessible to Marathi speakers. Ascertaining the date of the 'Sahyadrikhand' is extremely difficult: the text as we have it today is an amalgam of various layers composed at different points in time; Levitt suggests that these may have been parts of different texts. While searching for the exact year of composition is a daunting task, we can suggest a broad time-frame within which different parts of the text may have been composed. [Patil, 2010: 'Conflict, Identity and Narratives: The Brahman Communities of Western India from the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Centuries', a dissertation presented to the University of Texas at Austin.] According to Crawford, 'Sahyadrikhand' was 'clandestinely printed about the middle of the

18th century'. [Crawford, 1909: 'Legends of The Konkani', 23] The Gaitonde's critical edition can give us some useful pointers, yet the timeframe suggested is very broad. The text mentions King Mayuravarma, the founder of the Kadamba Dynasty in 345 CE; elsewhere, it refers to the 13th-century dualist philosopher Madhava; this is a span of almost a 1,000 years. With the help of later narratives, we can ascertain the lower end of this time-frame. The two manuscripts of the 'Shataprasn-nakalpalatika' (written in 1577 and 1690) mention the 'Sahyadrikhand'. The 'Konkanakhyani' (composed in 1721) refers to the descriptions of regions and Brahman groups described in the 'Sahyadrikhand'. This suggests that the portions mentioned in these two narratives, at least, were composed before the late-16th and early-18th centuries. The 'Sahyadrikhand's' demarcation of prominent bramhan communities in western India has a geographical dimension. Residents are integral to

the text's notion of a region: it is differentiated from another region not just by geographical boundaries, but also by social boundaries formed by the different peoples who reside therein.

The 'Sahyadrikhand' defines various regions in terms of the moral character of their Brahman residents. It identifies the region at the confluence of the Narmada and Krishna rivers as the Madhyadesh and extols its Brahmins as gods incarnate. Those living in the city of Trihotra (east of the Madhyadesh) are also likened to gods. Brahmins east of the Madhyadesh are devotees of Shiv, well-versed in all the sciences. Brahmins of the western Gauda region are full of rajas. The text mentions the Tailanga Brahmins from Andhra and the Dravida Brahmins from the Dravid country as compassionate people on Earth. While the text celebrates the good character of these Brahmins, it censures those outside the circle formed by these regions as demonic and heartless atheists. Brahmins from Karnata (Karnataka) are merciless; the Konkana Brahmins are evil.

The text defines two significant notions that best illustrate the inter-linked identity of regions and their Brahman residents: these two notions also come to form an important theme in the later narratives and debates over 'Sahyadrikhand'. The first notion subdivides Brahmins into the 'dashavidha' (tenfold), a categorisation based on regions located in the north and south. Skanda exhorts Shiva to elaborate on the ten-fold Brahmins. Shiva first enumerates the panca dravidas (the five Dravidas) from the southern regions: Dravidas (from the Dravid country), Tailangas (from Andhra), Karnatas (from Karnataka), Madhyadeshas (from Madhyadesh). How do these two notions interrelate? However, the text does not state explicitly the connection between the 10-fold Brahmins and the dasha doshas.

KONKANAPURANA



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