

The Tradition of Rāma Gupta and the Indian Nationalist Historians

Since 1923, when a fragmentary drama called *Devicandraguptam* was discovered by Lèvy¹ and Sarasvatī,² historians have entered into violent arguments about the historicity of Rāma Gupta. By doing so the historians of the present day have made the history of Rāma Gupta as much a part of historiography as of ancient history. This is so for two reasons: firstly the controversy over the acceptance of the Rāma Gupta story raised the problem of methods of history — how far a tradition could be used as a source. And secondly the judgements over the episode betray the attitude of certain modern historians for whom history has become as much a study of the past as the projection of the present over the past. In this paper I will try to answer two questions: how far the tradition can be trusted and why most Indian historians find it difficult to accept the historicity of the tradition.

In my opinion the tradition whose story was the central theme of the drama *Devicandraguptam* should be treated as part of the Vikram tradition of the conquest of Ujjain by King Vikramāditya from the Śakas.

As we do not know the exact date of Viśākhadatta, the author of *Devicandraguptam*, I take the reference in Bāṇa³ as the earliest reference to the story. Bāṇa only tells us a part of the story, that Candra Gupta in the guise of a woman killed a Śakādhipati. From Bāṇa's

¹ Sylvain Lèvy, 'Deux Nouveau Traité de Dramaturgie Indienne', *Journal Asiatique*, Tome CCIII, pp. 201-6.

² *Indian Antiquaries* 1923, p. 181. The story of the drama together with other traditions can be summarised in the following way: There was a king called Rāma Gupta who was utterly weak and incapable. His kingdom was invaded by a powerful Śaka king and Rāma was defeated and his city besieged. In order to save himself and his subjects Rāma agreed to surrender his wife to the enemy. Candra Gupta, the younger brother of the king protested against this act of dishonour and offered himself to go to the enemies' camp in the guise of his sister-in-law, and kill the Śaka ruler. This was agreed upon and Candra Gupta succeeded in his plan. Dhruvadevi and the citizens were grateful to Candra Gupta and were disgusted with the cowardly king. Rāma Gupta became suspicious of Candra Gupta and ultimately a quarrel broke out. Candra Gupta killed his brother, took over the kingdom and married his sister-in-law.

³ A. S. Altekar, 'A New Gupta King', *Journal of the Behar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. XIV, p. 230.

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commentator,⁴ who was certainly later than Viśākhadatta, we know the name of the woman was Dhruvadevi, and that she was Candra Gupta's sister-in-law. The other part of the story, which relates the ultimate usurpation of power by Candra Gupta after killing his brother and marrying his wife, is not mentioned. But there is nothing to show that Bāṇa was not aware of the other part of the story. It is often forgotten that the reference to this story in Harṣacarita is made by Skanda Gupta,⁵ the general of Harṣa who related it as an example of the danger of not being on one's guard against enemies, and hence to him the other part of the story is not so relevant.

The next reference to the story is in the drama itself. The drama, as we know, is not complete and the line quoted in *Nāṭyadarpana* 'iyam svāpāyaśaṅkinaḥ kṛtakonmattasya kumāra candraguptasya candrodavarnaṇena praveśapratipādiketi' may indicate a brotherly quarrel.⁶

But the story was mentioned in full for the first time in the Raṣtrakuta copper plates of the ninth century.⁷ These copper plates speak of a Gupta king who killed his brother, took over the kingdom and married his sister-in-law. This Gupta king of the Sanjan and Cambay copper plates should be identified with Candra Gupta II and not with Skanda Gupta as Bhandarkar⁸ thought. The copper plates mention that he was a great donor. From the Vikrama tradition and Huen Tsang⁹ it is known that the traditional Vikramāditya was also a great donor. Skanda Gupta who ruled during a period of chaos could hardly be considered as such.

The story was also narrated in a twelfth century Persian work, *Majmalu-t tawarikh*,¹⁰ where a new character was introduced. He was a minister name Safar. The name is identified with Śaba, who is referred to as a minister of Candra Gupta II in the Udayagiri cave inscription.¹¹ Safar originally supported Rawal (Rāmagupta) against Barkhamaris

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

⁵ F. B. Cowell, and F. W. Thomas, *The Harṣa Carita of Bāṇa.*, London, 1897, pp. 192-4.

⁶ *Journal Asiatique*, Tome CCIII, p. 205.

⁷ *Epigraphica Indica*, Vol. XVIII, p. 255.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁹ T. Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India 629-645 AD*, London, 1904, Vol. 2, p. 211.

¹⁰ H. M. Elliot, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, London, 1867, Vol. 1, p. 110.

¹¹ D. C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, Calcutta, 1942, p. 272.

(Vikramāditya), but later when Barkhamaris usurped power he joined his side. The theme of an old minister changing sides after the defeat of a ruler is used by Viśākhadatta in his *Mudrārākṣasa*. It could be that the character of the minister was added, following the example of Viśākhadatta. It seems that although the *Majmalu-t tawarikh* gives a garbled version of early Indian history, it is well acquainted with the tradition which maintains that Vikramāditya (Barkhamaris) killed the enemy of the family in the guise of a woman and later killed his brother and married his wife.

Rājaśekhara knew this story, although he gave a very confused version of it in his *Kāvyaīmāṃsā*.¹²

The Kālaka Suri's story does make a vague reference to the first part of the tradition which connects the Śaka campaign with the saving of a lady's honour. The Jain tradition refers to the conquest of Ujjain by the ninety-six Sahis with the help of Kālaka Suri who was actually taking revenge against King Garadabhalla who seduced his sister, the nun Sarasvatī.¹³ This tradition may be a garbled version of an earlier tradition which recalls the Śaka conquest of Western India, and a later tradition which connects Vikramāditya's victory over the Śakas with the saving of a lady's honour. The traditional Vikramāditya was known as the protector of ladies' honour.¹⁴

The other part of the tradition which relates the story of the killing of his brother by Vikramāditya was not completely forgotten. One of the titles of King Vikramāditya was Śakadvesi. This term occurs in line eighteen of the Mungher inscription of Deva Pāla. Charles Wilkins first published a translation of this inscription in the first volume of the *Asiatick Researches* in 1788.¹⁵ He explained the term thus: 'an epithet of Bekramadeetyo, a Raja. He succeeded his brother Sakadityo whom he put to death.'¹⁶ From other sources we know that the eighteenth century scholars largely depended on the brahmins of the Navadvip school for the explanation of various uncommon Sanskrit terms. That the brahmin who explained the term Śakadvesi to Wilkins was of this school is quite clear when we read his explanation of the term 'soogat' in terms of Navya Nyāya logic.¹⁷ It appears that these brahmins knew of that part of

¹² Altekar, *op. cit.*

¹³ Norman Brown, *The Story of Kalka*, Washington, 1933, pp. 54-60.

¹⁴ N. M. Penzer, *The Ocean of Story*, Vol. ix, Chap. cxxi, London, 1925-8, p. 13.

¹⁵ *Asiatick Researches*, Vol. 1, p. 129.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the story which connects the conquest of the Śakas by Vikramāditya with a fraternal quarrel. This is certainly a very confused version of the story, as the enemy Śaka has not become a brother of Vikramāditya, but it shows that the tradition was not quite forgotten.

How far may the story be taken as historical when judged with the other sources of the history of that time?

Gupta history does not preclude a war of succession after the death of Samudra Gupta. In fact there is every reason to believe that in this respect Gupta history was not much different from that of the Mughals. There is evidence which indicates troubles after the death of Candra Gupta I between Kāca and Samudra Gupta, and then the tradition that maintains that Candra Gupta II came to the throne after Rāma Gupta. There are again reasons to believe that the accession of Kumāra Gupta I to the imperial throne was not very peaceful. That there was a war of succession after the death of Kumāra Gupta I is universally accepted.

In early India widow remarriage was more common than it is today. A woman was not condemned if she left a mean-minded husband for a better-spirited man. Somadeva gives no sign of moral indignation against Mānapārā who left her husband, Arthlobha, for a spirited merchant, Sukhadhana, while he relates her story.¹⁸ So it was not impossible for Dhruvadevi to leave her mean-minded husband and marry her brother-in-law Candra Gupta.

It appears from the history of Samudra Gupta that the Śakas were a very powerful enemy and he probably arranged a matrimonial alliance with them.¹⁹ It is possible that a war broke out between the Śakas and the Guptas on account of some differences over the agreement of *kanyopāyanadāna upādāna*, and during the course of the war Candra Gupta replaced his brother, married his brother's wife and later conquered Ujjain. There are some authorities who find it difficult to believe that the Śakas would be so powerful as to overwhelm the Gupta Empire. But if the Śakas were so weak, Samudra Gupta would have conquered them himself and Candra Gupta would not have taken so many years to overthrow them.²⁰ So the story of Rāma Gupta has every possibility of being historical, even though it was embellished in the hands of dramatists and poets. The historicity of Rāma Gupta is further attested by some copper coins found in the Malwa area, which bear the

¹⁸ Penzer, *op. cit.*, Vol. iii, p. 290.

¹⁹ D. C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, p. 258. Also see Sten Konow, 'The *Devicandraguptam* and its author', J.B.O.R.S., Vol. XXIII, pt. iv, p. 444.

²⁰ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, London, 1954, p. 65.

legend 'Rāma Gupta' in the normal Gupta script except for the rather archaic 'ukar' after the letter 'ga'.²¹ Even if some of the coins bear the legend Rāma Gupta as Dr Narain holds, I do not find any reason to believe that there was another Gupta family contemporary to the Imperial Guptas.

So it is clear that the tradition of Rāma Gupta cannot be rejected as mere folklore or a fictional motif used by poets.²² Popular tradition cannot be accepted as a source of history on its face value. But it should not be rejected without critical assessment. In India legends grew around outstanding personalities, but these legends always contained at least a germ of truth. An example of this can be found when one reads the journals of John Marshall, an English factor, who was in India in the early part of the eighteenth century. His stories show that Akbar had already become a legendary figure, but even the most fantastic stories about his religious opinions show that folklore was well aware of Akbar's change of religious policy.²³ Dr Eggermont²⁴ has shown that even the most unreliable tradition like that in the *Aśokāvadāna* contains some historical information; for example, the record of an eclipse of the sun. Too much reliance on epigraphic evidence does not give us an all-round picture of history. In India inscriptions were mostly official proclamations of policy, *praśasti*, or records of land grants, and although they are contemporary evidence, they are at their best official records of history, whereas tradition and literary evidence may help us to form an unofficial view. Epigraphic silence is no evidence against the existence of Rāma Gupta. The genealogies given in the inscription of Candra Gupta and his successors were silent about Rāma Gupta for the same reason for which Pura Gupta and his successors were silent about Skanda Gupta.

Most Indian historians reject the story of Rāma Gupta as unhistorical. The real difficulty of the Indian authorities in accepting the historicity of the story is connected with the Indian national movement. The nationalist historians in trying to restore national prestige, which was humiliated by foreign rule, looked back upon a 'golden age'. This 'golden age' was found in the Gupta inscriptions. The Guptas were

²¹ *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, Vol. XII, p. 109.

²² H. C. Raychowdhuri, *Political History of Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1955, pp. 553-4, note 2.

²³ S. A. Khan, *John Marshall in India*, Oxford, 1927, p. 371.

²⁴ P. H. L. Eggermont, *The chronology of the reign of Aśoka Moriya*, Leiden, 1956, p. 186.

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depicted as liberators from foreign rule, and Candragupta II Vikramāditya became a national hero. In this cult of the 'golden age' the historical figures are distorted by the projection of the modern idea of a hero onto them. Hence it is difficult to believe that a son of Samudragupta, the 'Indian Napoleon', would kill his brother and marry his brother's wife. Professor R. K. Majumdar²⁵ finds that the killing of a brother and the marrying of a brother's wife 'clashes with our cherished notions of morality and decorum'. Professor Majumdar forgets that his cherished notions of morality belong to the nineteenth and twentieth century Hindu middle class. The fraternal affection and the motherly love of a sister-in-law is an ideal of Hindu family life. There were many novels written on that theme in the early years of this century. A King of Kings of the fourth century could hardly be judged by the moral standards of the modern middle class. Raychowdhuri²⁶ also suffered from the same difficulty when he tried to explain that the words '*bhrata*' and '*bandhu*' do not necessarily prove that Rāma Gupta was a brother or a stepbrother of Candragupta, as the word may mean a cousin, relation or friend. This point becomes clear when we find that the eighteenth-century Brahmin pandit did not find it difficult to believe that Vikramāditya killed his brother. He viewed the past with a very different set of values. The Guptas were not the national liberators that some nationalist historians would have us believe. In fact according to the informers of Alberuni,²⁷ they were a very wicked people. Their history was quite forgotten until the reading of the Allahabad pillar inscription in the nineteenth century. Thus the nationalist historians are unable to believe the story as it does not fit in with their concept of Gupta history. The myth of the 'golden age' served a great purpose in the liberation of India from foreign rule. But when that end is achieved the work of the nationalist historians becomes a part of the study of historiography, and here they follow the same fate as the Whig historians of England.

²⁵ *The History and Culture of the Indian People: Classical Age*, Bombay, p. 18.

²⁶ H. C. Raychowdhuri, *Vikramāditya in History and Legend*, Ujjain, 1948.

²⁷ E. L. Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, Vol. II, London, 1888, p. 7.