

COURSE : DISASTER MANAGEMENT (MA/MSc PART I)

Paper : I

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Topic : Disasters In Ancient Indian Literature

INTRODUCTION :

Sanskrit literature of ancient and medieval India is rich in information related to earth sciences. Books referred as Sthala-purāṇa or Kṣetra-māhātmya offer details of places that have been of historical and religious importance. It is observed that the contents of these writings cannot be taken as accurate descriptions of the region or locale considered. However, they may provide information that would be of interest to scientists, engineers and archaeologists. While searching for leads on earthquakes and disasters in ancient India, you will come across the Prabhāsa-khaṇḍa (Prabhāsa module) of Skānda-purāṇa. This forms the last part of the Purāṇa as available in the South Indian versions. This part of the purāṇa actually contains four books, namely, Prabhāsa-kṣetramāhātmya, Vastrāpatha-kṣetra-māhātmya, Arbuda-khaṇḍa and Dvārakā-māhātmya. Here, the interest is mainly in the first book, which itself is in two parts. Prabhāsa-kṣetramāhātmya (abbreviated as PK) is implied to be concerned with the region around Prabhāsa. Gujarat region is well known to be seismically active and hence susceptible to earthquakes and tsunamis (sea waves due to earthquakes) along the coast. What is found in PK is an astounding narration of a phenomenon, which can only be interpreted as a somewhat fanciful description of a natural disaster that should have visited the Gujarat region in the remote past. An equally interesting event described is the burning of river Sarasvatī, which obviously is an ancient version of how the once bountiful river dried up leading to disastrous consequences. Prabhāsa in popular parlance is currently identified with the famous pilgrim center Somanātha (20.90 N 70.50 E) on the west coast of the Sourashtra region. However, the present study indicates that the original Prabhāsa was not with Somanātha, but was probably located around (23.50 N 71.50 E), nearer to the Kutch region. Further, a natural event that finds mention consistently in several texts is conjectured to be a nova or brightening of a star in the star cluster of Kṛttikā (Pleiades).

Skanda-purāṇa

The Purāṇa literature in Sanskrit is voluminous describing what is popularly taken to be mythology linked with Hindu religious practices. Historically Purāṇas are enumerated as eighteen in number. It would appear that all the Purāṇas have evolved from a smaller nucleus to their present size. Skānda-purāṇa as available now is the largest of the eighteen Purāṇas with slightly more than 84,000 verses. In line with other Purāṇas, Skānda is also attributed to the authorship of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana or Veda-Vyāsa, the legendary composer of Mahābhārata. However, even a casual reading of the text presently available would point out that much material should have been added by

different authors at different times. It is known that the Nepalese version of Skānda-purāṇa does not contain Prabhāsa-khaṇḍa1 . Hence, PK can be treated as an independent traditional text, in Sanskrit. Alberuni who accompanied Mahamud of Ghazni (10-11 cent. AD) in the plunder of Somanatha describes the place in his book on India . He also enumerates all the Puranas including Skānda. PK contains description of consecration of a deity at Somanātha in purāṇic style, but does not even remotely refer to a foreign invasion. Thus, the composition of PK may be assigned to a period earlier than at least ninth century AD. The style of PK is simple but old fashioned. It is in the form of a conversation between the divine couple Śiva and Pārvatī. Several other personages are brought in to narrate a story that is at times inconsistent, and lacking in a sense of chronology, but nevertheless amply describing a natural disaster of monumental proportions. The narration is in tune with the ancient practice of personifying natural forces and dramatizing the phenomenon. A typical example of this approach from Mahābhārata may be cited here. Balarāma, elder brother of Kṛṣṇa does not take part in the epic war. Instead, he goes on a pilgrimage along the course of river Sarasvatī. In his northward journey, he comes to a certain place and wonders why the west flowing river should have suddenly turned eastwards. The reason stated in the text is that when some sages on the eastern part of the land performed a sacrifice, Sarasvatī (personified as a goddess) flowed eastward to fulfill the wishes of her devoted sages, who liked to bathe in the holy river. Such a mythological modeling is a distinct possibility for a natural structure, since we see that river Śatadru (literally one who flows in hundred ways) presently called Sutlej, exhibits a steep eastward bend near Ropar (300 N, 760 E).

Prabhāsa and Sarasvati of PK

The above description of the text of PK provides what is purported to be the genesis, including a brief geography of Prabhāsa region of Saurāṣṭra. It has to be borne in mind that in ancient times the connotation Saurāṣṭra included the present day Kutch region also. The text narrates five natural phenomena, namely, (a) falling of celestial objects and their intrusion into earth, (b) receding of the sea coast, (c) swelling of the sea leading to wide spread loss of life, (d) a terrestrial fire attributed as the cause of drying of River Sarasvati, (e) a severe famine. It is not that the text cogently describes any of the above in a systematic fashion. Nevertheless, a reader of PK will be able to surmise that a textual tradition exists to the effect, the northwestern part of India, suffered a great natural disaster. It may be speculated that, this should have been the reason for migration of population out of this region. About the description of the places, if we take Prabhāsa 16 of PK as the place, with the same name (identified with Somanātha) today, some locations such as the tapta-toya hot springs and an east flowing river are in order. However, when it comes to the path of Sarasvati, its link with Somanātha is riddled with contradictions. The path described in Ch. 35.21-47, is reasonably consistent upto present day Rann of Kutch. How the river could have reached, Somanātha (20.90 N 70.50 E) is not explainable from the contents of the text. One has to only speculate that

perhaps Sarasvati had a branch reaching Somanātha, not delineated by PK for some unknown reasons. The statement of Alberuni that a river by name Sarasuti was flowing at Somanātha may lend some support to this assumption . Recently geologists have also speculated on the possibility of the HimālayanSarasvati reaching the present day Somanātha alias Prabhāsa . On the contrary, the conflicting contents of PK might imply that river Sarasvati reached the sea only in Rann of Kutch.

Vedic Literature

Fire or Agni is a prominent god in the Vedas. He is not same as Sun, even though, similarities are present. He is connected with heaven and earth in a unique way. In interpreting the word arati, which is used only with reference to Agni, twenty one relations have been identified between Agni on one side and heaven and earth on the other side. All of these highlight presence of Agni as a bright light in the sky, in a physical sense also. A few hymns of Ṛigveda are addressed to Agni, meanings of which have close resemblance to the type of celestial phenomena under discussion.