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Revisiting Veer Vinod: First positivist history of Mewar

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to establish Veer Vinod as a foundational text in the trend of positivist history writing in Mewar of the 18th Century India. Veer Vinod was a project on the history of Mewar written by Shyamaldas (1836–93) the royal poet who adorned the court of Maharana Sajjan Singh in the time (1859-84) of Mewar. It deviates from the trend of historical documentation practiced by the 'Kavis and Bhats' of the then Rajputana. It was printed in four volumes in 1886. Written in Urdu-mixed Hindi and composed in an eloquent style, this book had achieved a high standard in the early Indian history-literature of Hindi by being the first detailed written history of Mewar. Shyamaldas was appointed to a position in what was probably a first for Rajasthan's princely states, perhaps even for India, as the head of a History Department with a professional staff and a large budget. This event proved to be unique in being the only instance where a Maharana established a separate department and provided enough money to cover the expenses incurred on account of the staff, research and printing. Shyamaldas excels in his description of issues and events considered contentious as they are delivered in a factual manner. Yet he remained simply a "Darbari Charan Historian" even though he distanced himself from the mythical history of the bards and plunges into the new positivist history through Veer Vinod. The way he treats history makes Veer Vinod a work of abiding interest. This research paper aims to present a case for Veer Vinod as a book which is highly germane in the analysis of the positivist trends in history writing pertaining to Mewar in princely India.

Keywords: Mewar, Veer Vinod, Shyamaldas, Positivist history, Charan, Maharana Sajjan Singh

Introduction

Veer Vinod: An overview

Mewar is the focus of Shyamaldas' interest, attention, and concern, and he calls attention to it. The description of Mewar includes its rivers, mountains, topography, minerals, forests, flora, and fauna, wells and underground water resources, agricultural products, festivals, weather, rains, calendar, Jagirdars of Mewar, religious temples, various state departments, districts and their geographical details, communities, his own caste of Charan and other castes, his family history, and excerpts from travelers' opinions on Indians have all been specifically absorbed by him from the Gazetteer genre. He gives us a detailed account of the city of Udaipur. He describes the key locations, such as royal palaces and the havelis of influential people, as well as their surroundings. Part 1 of Veer Vinod is particularly information-rich, evoking both British Gazetteers and Persian models like Abu'l Fazl's micro-informative *Ain-i-Akbari*.

Veer Vinod comes off as a book which is placed at the crossroads of regionalism and cosmopolitanism. It offers details on the social, cultural, and religious practices. He asserts proudly: "In this kingdom leaders of all the religions are honored and respected" ^[1]. Colonel Impey, British resident in Mewar told Maharana Sajjan Singh that he could find several persons for the job of a Musahib (Minister) but not for writing of history; therefore, Shyamaldas should be asked to write history so that he and his kingdom's fame would survive hundreds of years. Maharana liked his advice very much. He ordered Shyamaldas not only to tend to important state matters from time to time, but also to be principally engaged in the writing of history ^[2].

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¹ Nina Sharma and Indu Shekhar, *Becoming A Modern Historian In Princely India*, Olympia Publishers London, 2015, p.23

² *ibid.* p.18

The Maharana stated, "(We) do not want eulogy in history" [3]. Vir Vinod is a voluminous work on the history of Mewar and seventeen other states of Rajputana. The intellectual acumen of Shyamal Das was fully acknowledged by the Maharanas of Mewar, when they appointed him to important posts in the State. Maharana Sajjan Singh established the 'Historical department' sometime in 1879. Shyamal Das made its head [4]. This was evident during the reigns of Maharanas Shambhu Singh, Sajjan Singh and Fateh Singh. He had deep roots in Mewar and was well-versed in its culture, history and politics [5].

History writing as perceived by Shyamaldas

The terms "authenticity" and "genuineness" that feature in Veer Vinod, use of words like "spurious," "mistakes" and "incorrect", "fabricated," and "forged" are too prominent. On inscriptions specific to the battles concerned with *Prithvirajraso*, Shyamaldas expresses how difficult it is to extract the real information from copper plate inscriptions due to the contradictory information they carry. He believes this seems to have been done by the blind Bhatons [6]. Shyamaldas highlights his engagement in the most fundamental task by the standards of modern historiography: the verification of source material. His language is highly judgmental and admits no shades of gray facts are either correct or inaccurate, a text is either genuine or false. He writes that he had no idea how to go about writing a history when he was asked to do so in the 1870s, and therefore had to consult several Persian chronicles in order to get started [7]. His zeal to write an objective account on the issue of multiplicity of dates of Akbar's birth is clear from the manner in which he reached out to the famous date-knowers of India [8]. Tod had already attained the hallowed status that no other scholar, Indian or Western, has equaled to this day in Rajasthan. Aware that he might be thought heretical, Shyamaldas had in fact been very diffident in noting inaccuracies in Tod's dating of events involving Prithviraj. Nonetheless, Shyamaldas had dared to differ from Tod. Tod's was the final word on things related to Rajputs [9]. For instance, Shyamaldas writes that Colonel Tod Sahib is wrong in recording the battle which took place in Vikrami 1633 which was fought by Shahzade Salim because at that time Jahangir i.e. Prince Salim was only six years old. He goes on to write that, "it can be proved even by thinking that at such an age, the prince cannot be sent to fight. Apart from this, it is also written in the reliable chronicles of Rajputana that the battle took place only with Kunwar Mansingh, the picture of Dhaur Maharaj Pratap Singh's time i.e. (map of photographs) still exists in the hand of Musavvi of the same time, in which there is no sign of Shahzade Salim." He even includes Abul Fazal's opinion

from *Akbarnama* [10]. On the writing traditions that existed in Hindustan he writes that

"In the past, the custom of writing history was among the Muslims, not among the Hindus, and if there was anything, it was only with the encouragement of poets. They used to write poetry, and Barwa people used to write a little bit of history along with genealogy in their books. But it should be kept in mind that the genealogies found before Vikrami 1100 in the books of these people are all impure and speculative, that is, they are made by guess; And between Vikrami 1400 and Vikrami 1600, many mistakes are found in Kursinaams (Vanshvali)." Shyamaldas benefited from an extensive network of European acquaintances. In this most reformist era in nineteenth-century Mewar history, Shyamaldas was acting in concert with the desire of his young Maharanas to embrace and emulate the ways of the British. The respect extended to Shyamaldas by the academic establishment, as exemplified in the publication of several articles in the premier periodical of the day, may derive at least partly from the fact of his location outside British India [11].

Consolidation of Rajput power as the leitmotif of Veer Vinod:

History writing of Maharans of Mewar was used as a strategy by Shyamaldas for representation of tropes of Rajput power. As a court historian and a political advisor to the Maharana, he was bound to a certain extent to glorify the past of the House of Mewar. The following excerpt is an apt depiction of the above. Das writes,

"From the ancient and new Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Hindi books, few more such books will come out, which contain the history of India and do not describe the great Rana of Udaipur with greatness. If the meaning of all those books is written here, then a small book can be made. There are many reasons for the greatness of this family. First of all, the kings of Surya and Chandra dynasty are considered great in India. Among whose branches the clan of Udaipur is at the top. Secondly, this family has been making prestigious kings since a long time till today. Thirdly, the kings of this dynasty have saved their greatness by fighting big battles with the Muslim emperors of India. Every emperor of India considered the dynasty of Udaipur to be the biggest among Indians. Apart from this, unlike the Muslims, this family did not have enmity with the people of any religion, the first proof of which is that the people of Jainism, considering Mewar as a place of refuge, built hundreds of big temples of their faith, and the kings here gave full help in their construction" [12]. As the states of Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur asserted their independence vis-à-vis the Mughal state, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century they evolved a political and ritual culture that was aimed at strengthening and consolidating their power and prestige in the troubled times. There is reason enough to believe that commissioning of an objective written history of Mewar at the suggestion of British political agents was a corollary of times when power was fleeting at grassroot level. Shyamal Das was very self-conscious about how he came across to

³ *ibid.* p.19

⁴ *ibid.* p.165

⁵ *ibid.* p.3

⁶ Cynthia Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000*, University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom, 2016, p.554

⁷ *ibid.* p.223

⁸ Shymal Das, *Vir Vinod*, 4 Vols., original Printed at Sajjan Yantralaya, Udaipur, 1885-6, Pt.2, p.207

⁹ Cynthia Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000*, University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom, 2016, p.231

¹⁰ Shymal Das, *Vir Vinod*, 4 Vols., original Printed at Sajjan Yantralaya, Udaipur, 1885-6, Pt.2, p.154

¹¹ Cynthia Talbo, *The Last Hindu Emperor Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000*, University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom, 2016, p.228

¹² *Ibid.* Pt.1. P.230

readers and sought to avoid being associated with the Charan-like practice of singing odes to one's instructors. In contrast to accounts that were written subjectively and without consideration, he wanted his to be acknowledged as being founded on objective truth and contemporary study.

Shyamaldas, the critical historian

How he creates a solid base of local sources and evidence to settle the chronology and sequence of historical events and happenings while steering clear of religious and communal biases can be best understood from his repudiation of *Prithviraj Raso's* historicity. Shyamaldas challenged the common ascription of a twelfth-century date to *Prithviraj Raso*; the text which was valued in nineteenth-century scholarship, thereby undermined its importance^[13]. He even produced an article solely on this theme by the name "The Antiquity, Authenticity and Genuineness of the Epic called *Prithviraj Raso*," published in 1886 by the most prestigious learned body of colonial India, the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

"So that no one might argue that it might be a mistake of the scribe," Shyamaldas takes pains to cite at least two instances of the *Raso's* date for each event. He then establishes the inaccuracy of these dates by comparison with the testimony of Persian texts, especially the mid thirteenth-century *Tabaq-i-Nasir*, whose detailed description of the hostilities between Prithviraj Chauhan and Muhammad of Ghur became the standard Indo-Persian account. Because the *Raso* situated Prithviraj almost a century earlier than he had actually lived, there was a considerable gap in the king lists that later bards had to creatively adjust, leading to numerous "mistakes." Thus, if Shyamaldas' assessment of the *Raso* as spurious was accepted, many of the dynastic histories of Rajasthan's ruling families would also have to be rejected^[14].

Shyamaldas places *Raso's* true date of composition between 1583 and 1613 CE. The basic historical method employed by Shyamaldas was comparison of several different types of primary sources pertaining to the same event or era. The extensive use of primary sources is a notable aspect of his scholarship. In order to make his points, Shyamaldas cited entire verses from *Raso* and summarized their gist in English; passages from *Tabaq-i-Nasiri* are also quoted in translation. The most amply documented source material of all are the inscriptions Shyamaldas relies on as proof of the true dates for Prithviraj Chauhan. It is only because he was able to cross-check *Prithviraj Raso* with these other supposedly more trustworthy varieties of historical evidence that Shyamaldas could pronounce the *Raso* to be erroneous. Although it appears routine to us today, such comparisons would have been much harder to carry out in the pre colonial past, even had the inclination to do so existed. That is, European-style scholarship on India's past required a substantial collecting effort – a variety of different texts and documents had to be gathered together. It also required the presence of investigators able to decipher and interpret both the language and the style of diverse historical materials. And Shyamaldas was able to do just so with utter precision

^[15]. Shyamaldas' critique had an immediate, and long-lasting impact. Only because the epic was thought to be the earliest known work in the Hindi language^[16]. The implication is that questioning *Raso's* status, as Kaviraj Shyamaldas did, was a disloyal act^[17].

Once we situate Shyamaldas within the context of the Mewar court of the late 1860s through early 1880s, it becomes less surprising that the person most responsible for displacing *Raso* from its position at the pinnacle of Hindi literature should have been a member of a traditional bardic community from a princely state^[18]. In Veer Vinod, he writes that, "In the same way *Prithviraj Raasa* has also been imagined by someone, as in this, imaginary names and imaginary stories have been created with only few true names." "The real names written in *Tabakati Nasiri* do not match with the imaginary names of *Prithvirajrasa*, and the imaginary names are also coined by completely ignorant people, who are sure that these are fictitious names. There is a difference between the writings of *Prithviraj Rasa* and the statement of Persian chronicles"^[19]. As a result, he is quite successful in demystifying a concocted text, which for a few centuries seemed to shed great light on the history of Rajasthan^[20].

Mewar and the arrival of printing press

Maharana Sajan Singh is credited with establishing the printing press in 1881, mainly to publish the Mewar Government Gazette, named 'Sajan Kirti Sudhakar'. Initially the printing press appears to have been a very small establishment, located in a part of the building of the accounts department. But as the work on the writing of Vir Vinod progressed, the Maharana appears to have decided to print Vir Vinod at Udaipur itself and in his own printing press. It could not be ascertained as to when this decision was taken, but the 'Chhapekhane ka Vivaran' (An Account of the Printing Press) starts from October, 1885 which shows that it began to be implemented sometime early in 1886. The Vir Vinod project provided much of the dynamism which expanded a small press hiding at the back of the accounts department into a major department in the Mewar government^[21]. The printing press expanded greatly during the years Shyamal Das' work was being printed there. It signaled the need for expansion when it requested the appointments of one general assistant and one accounts clerk, technical persons like pressmen, more tools and machines and storage space and equipment and buildings^[22]. Maharana Fateh Singh's role in the writing, supporting, financing and making efforts personally to facilitate *Vir Vinod*, is overshadowed by the 'sealing' of *Vir Vinod*. Fateh Singh's role in the project on Vir Vinod thus has been reduced to the negative act of sealing it^[23].

The printing of Vir Vinod started in 1886 and took many

¹⁵ *ibid.*p.227

¹⁶ *ibid.*p.229

¹⁷ *ibid.*p.234

¹⁸ *ibid.*p.228

¹⁹ *ibid.*Pt. 1. p. 281

²⁰ Cynthia Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000*, University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom, 2016, p.222

²¹ Nina Sharma and Indu Shekhar, *Becoming A Modern Historian In Princely India*, Olympia Publishers London, 2015, p.165

²² *ibid.*p.189

²³ *ibid.*p.162

¹³ Cynthia Talbot, *The Last Hindu Emperor Prithviraj Chauhan and the Indian Past, 1200–2000*, University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom, 2016, p.220

¹⁴ *ibid.*p.223

years because an extremely complex labor was required for the process: It called for setting, printing, proofing etc. All these activities were carried out manually by composers, pressmen, proof-readers etc. Trained labor was not in abundance in those days and especially in a slow city like Udaipur. The printing press was also printing the 'Sajjan Kirt Sudhakar', the Mewar Government Gazette and a number of texts in Hindi and Sanskrit ^[24]. It was published at the pleasure of the Maharana by his printing press, itself a rare and a unique facility in 1896. To say it was sealed from 1894 to 1947 assumes that most items printed by a government are public documents and for sale in one way or another. That was not the case in the princely States. Gaining access to Vir Vinod was like gaining access to the Maharana's library, both required permission ^[25]. About the availability of Vir Vinod, different historians use different terms, rather loosely: banned, sealed, dumped, locked; but without an agreement on 'when': between 1886 to 1913 ^[26]. A commercial market of printing, publishing and distribution was not an institutional business in Mewar up to the late nineteenth century. As far as we know there was no 'Book-market' in Udaipur. Shyamal Das imported books from far off places in British India and London etc. as printed-scholarship had not yet arrived.

Conclusion

Through a select range of themes from Veer Vinod, this paper establishes its case for the need to include more rigorously the study of Veer Vinod in foundational themes pertaining to the study of medieval Rajasthan especially for micro study of Mewar. The need for a continuous endeavor to refine and comprehend the complexities of such a book which is stitched together with a zeal to investigate events, beliefs and people that formed the compendium of accepted history could not be stressed enough. Veer Vinod carves a niche for itself in being the first objective written history of Mewar which reiterated western historical methods. Das emulates with considerable skill and success the academic establishment of colonial India's notions of modern historical methodology.

The example of Shyamaldas brings to light the complexities of knowledge formation by the late nineteenth century. The hereditary bard adhering to new standards of scholarship in the discipline of history, rejected Tod who back in the day was considered the final word on Rajputs. The medieval period of Indian history is considered to be the most difficult and controversial. Events become vehicles for nationalist and communal fervor. But this is where he excels by his judicious delineation of events and his determinedly dispassionate approach. His description of issues and events commonly considered contentious is delivered in a factual manner devoid of judgment. The intricate flows of knowledge that we get to know in Veer Vinod through reception, transformation, and recirculation that had transpired over the nineteenth century heralded the beginning of objective writing in Princely India. The empiricist stance adopted by Shyamaldas was a product of its own intellectual times and employed a narrow definition of acceptable evidence. This reflects, as Talbot puts it "how

history writing is simply a very specific medium of cultural memory with its own rules and traditions."

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²⁴ *ibid.*p.136

²⁵ *ibid.*p.125

²⁶ *ibid.*p.124