

Visualising Region in History: Analytical Study of Evolution of Vidarbha as a Region

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Abstract: *Vidarbha is the ancient name given for the eastern part of present day Maharashtra in India. It is a unique example to illustrate the processes involved in shaping of a geographical space into a full-fledged historical region. From the early days of human history, it displayed unique cultural identities and human settlements grew up in the Wardha – Wainganga river valley which had been identified as the core habitational area of Vidarbha. The cultural developments were visible in this area without much political intervention. The contour and its spatial identity also kept on changing from time to time. What were the major factors behind such changes? The period of our concern is a turning point as Vidarbha came under direct political control and new administrative cum territorial units were formed. How do we try to understand the further development of this region when it no longer remained the centre of any political power after sixth century CE. What happened to this immensely important historical cum geographical space called Vidarbha after sixth century CE? Did new spatial and cultural changes occur at that time? These are the major questions which we would try to address and understand in this paper in light of theories related to historical geography and concept of region as envisaged by eminent historians and geographers. In this article we are trying to understand the concept of space in history citing the example of Vidarbha. How Vidarbha has been conceptualized in the literary sources and also relying on the archaeological evidence to show how new cultural developments took place from within and also external influences shaped the physical as well as cultural landscapes of Vidarbha and finally led to delineation of it as a region.*

Keywords: *Vidarbha, Space, Landscape, Deccan, Region.*

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Introduction

The central theme of this article revolves around the concept of space and its historical evolution over a long span of time. For this matter we have anchored this in the context of a specific example of Vidarbha. The term Vidarbha has appeared in several ancient texts and even archaeologists have used the term though their main focus area was Wardha – Wainganga valley which has been designated as the core area of Vidarbha. Instead of accepting Vidarbha as a region it has been conceived as a space that was preferred for human settlement from the early period of human history. This is well confirmed both by the archaeological and literary sources. How this space evolved as a distinctive cultural zone and whether historically larger spatial formations ever developed and Vidarbha emerged as a region at any particular historical time frame is what we are trying to understand.

Historiography

It was from 1970s onwards that the understanding of region and the elements involved in making a region were studied afresh under the first German Orissa Research project. Region itself became subject of interest among the historians which was no longer understood under the theoretical framework of feudalism instead new research and debates were introduced. This project is also important as in making region the subject of discussion under the discipline of history it involved scholars from sister disciplines— indology, linguistic social anthropology. B.D.Chattopadhyaya gave the idea of autonomous space, disregarding the concept of centralized omnipresent state in pre-colonial India. According to him spaces are essentially differentiated, and historical growth is uneven across spatial segment. The different spatial entities lived together and constituted each other through the normal processes of interaction, entanglement and overlaps. The sub-regions integrated with the regions, and even the regions also imbibed elements of the trans –region or Pan-India in course of constituting each other. For instance, the cultural linkages of Vidarbha with rest of Deccan and even with Northern India from the early historic phase bring into relief the wide ranging and vivid interactions¹. B.P. Sahu viewed that it was from the early medieval period, multiple processes of changes happening simultaneously in the domains of culture, economy and society. These changes took place in relation to each other. Between fourth to sixth century CE. there was expansion of agrarian base, new crops were introduced. Localities were formed which served as an agrarian space, these localities join together to form sub regions – deśa. There was formation of regional agrarian bases in different part of the Indian subcontinent. To sum up his view region were not undifferentiated, and they encompassed varying sub-regions and localities². The coming together of localities led to the shaping of sub-regions, the latter coalesced in the making of a region. In the recently edited work by Hermann Kulke and Georg Berkemer the

issue of the formation of cultural zones and their networks of interaction in relation to larger historical/cultural formations constitutes the subject matter of some of the contributions in this volume. To illustrate, Bengal was the product of a combination of sub-regions such as Radha, Varendra, Vanga and Samatata. Similarly, in Odisha Kalinga, Tosali/Utkala and Daksina Kosala were broadly the constituent sub-regional entities. What separated one sub-region from another were their environment, history and cultural ingredients, which included food, forms of cooking, spoken language, and networks of marriage preference, art and architecture.³

B.D. Chattopadhyaya has coined the concept of imitable model negating the idea that a particular cultural pattern engulfed the entire region in pre-colonial times. Instead, he cited that the construction of Buddhist monuments and gifts of land to the monasteries were given in the Gupta age whereas the basic imitable model of kingship was Brahmanical at that time. What is most important aspect of his idea on region is that the processes or characteristics in making of region would obviously vary from one region to another and the chronology too may have differed⁴.

Vidarbha in Making

It is necessary to trace the patterns of changes and continuities that shaped the physical and cultural landscape of Vidarbha from a long period of time and ultimately led to delineation of Vidarbha as a region. The processes of shaping Vidarbha into a region can be understood if we trace it from a long span of historical time. The complex processes that were involved in shaping Vidarbha as a region has been addressed from two perspectives: firstly, by understanding the perceptions that developed in the minds of people about Vidarbha and secondly the actual historical processes.

Many perceptions of Vidarbha have been understood by focusing on the literary sources. The locale of these literary texts was mainly in Northern India. Various ideas of Vidarbha revealed through such texts were mainly the perception of the outsiders, i.e., the people who were the dwellers of the brahmanical heartland. In some texts, Vidarbha has been understood in the sense of people or tribal unit, whereas in most of the literary sources it was presented as a newly established kingdom. Another interesting aspect of Vidarbha revealed through these literary sources was conceptualization of Vidarbha in connection to Daṇḍakāraṇya.

The earliest reference of Vidarbha in the literary sources is found in Aitereya Brāhmana. In this text, the prince Bhima is called Vaidarbha. Thus, it is believed that the name Vidarbha was derived from the name of this prince. Bhima was contemporary of the Gandhara ruler Nagnajit: Bhimaya Vaidharbhaya Nagnajite Gandharaya⁵. This not only hints on the nomenclature but shows that Vidarbha had emerged as a kingdom like

Gandhara. Even it is seen that people of Vidarbha were considered to be different from the other groups of people from Deccan. Unlike the Andhras, Pundras, Savaras and Pulindas and Mutibas, the people of Vidarbha were not considered 'udantya' i.e., people living beyond the borders of Aryandom. Though Vidarbha was geographically part of Deccan, but due to its strong cultural association with Northern India, it was considered as an extension of the Aryandom. In Jaiminiya Upaniṣad, Vidarbha was identified as a place where a special breed of dogs (Machala) was found profusely⁶. In Brhadāraṅkya Upaniṣad Vidarbha was perceived as a place where efflorescence of knowledge took place. It mentions of a renowned teacher Vaidarbhi Kaundinya. His name suggests that by that time Vidarbha had already earned fame for cultivating knowledge and the teacher Kaundinya was thus associated with the place from where he came⁷. That Vidarbha continued to be an important centre of learning and cultural activities in the later period is even known from the works of Rajashekara. Though Painin's Aṣṭadhyayi does not speak of Vidarbha directly, but mentions of a place called Kundin. This place Kundin was placed in the category of nagara by Panini⁸. Archaeologists have identified Kundin with the modern Kaundinyapura in the Amravati district. It was habitational site of Vidarbha which flourished from the Mauryan time and continued till the sixth century CE. In Sabhāparva as well as in Nalopakhyan parva of Vanaparva, Vidarbha appeared as a powerful kingdom under the famous king Bhima. In the Sabhāparva of Mahābhārata it is stated that the kingdom of Vidarbha was located in the route connecting Aryavarta with the south⁹.

As far as Puranic traditions are concerned, Vidarbha was considered as one of important janapada of Deccan which developed into a kingdom. In the Purāṇas (Matsya, Vayu and Padma) dated between 3rd to 5th century CE, Vidarbha was considered as a famous kingdom of Deccan named after his king Vidarbha. The stories presented in these Purāṇas throws light on the political history of Vidarbha and how later rulers of Vidarbha (Yadus and Bhojas) derived their lineage from the sons of this famous king¹⁰. In the Puranas the people of Vidarbha were called Dakṣiṇāpathavasinah.

In the non-religious texts Vidarbha was understood not only in terms of its territorial identity but also included its people. Kalidāsa in his Raghuvamṣa uses the word Kratha-Kaisik (meaning that the dwellers of Vidarbha were descendants of two legendary figures Kratha and Kaisik)¹¹. Kundin which was earlier considered as an important urban centre, appeared as the capital of Vidarbha in this work of Kalidāsa¹². In Malavikāgnimitram Vidarbha has been depicted as a newly established kingdom which was under the influence of the Mauryas. All these literary evidences might not give the picture of the processes that were involved in making Vidarbha a region, but help us to understand how it was conceptualized in the minds of the people.

Archaeological evidence not only throw light on the material culture but even help to trace the changes and continuities that Vidarbha experienced in different historical periods which led to the emergence of Vidarbha as region. However, both archaeological as well as literary sources are consensus on the fact that Vidarbha had a long history of human intervention. The availability of natural resources and the advantageous geographical location where the main reasons why human settlement grew up in Vidarbha from the Chalcolithic times. There was hardly any disruption in the human settlement till third century CE. Habitational sites mainly developed in the Wardha- Wainganga River basin which was identified as the core area of Vidarbha. Vidarbha displayed its distinct cultural identity from the megalithic period onwards which is reflected through its burial customs and styles.

The complexity in the cultural landscape of Vidarbha was largely due to various factors that took place in the peninsular India. Vidarbha as an integral territorial part of Deccan reacted with those new elements and displayed its unique cultural identity. Some of those new elements were acquired with the process of interaction with the cultural trends of the northern part of the subcontinent and parts of peninsular India (especially the Western part of Deccan that was the core area of administration of the Satavahanas). In this chapter we will try to trace those influences that played pivotal role during this period of time. Firstly, the deep penetration of Buddhism from the Mauryan times added a new cultural dimension to this region. Sites like Pauni, Mandal yielded evidence of structures of Buddhist stupa¹³. Excavations at Pauni have brought to light remains of a very flourishing Hinayana Buddhist establishment, dating back to the late Mauryan and early Sunga period¹⁴. This establishment comprising of two stupas – one at the Jagannath mound other at the Chandkapura about a mile due south of Pauni, and the remains of a possible brick-built monastery in the regions adjacent to these stupas. This kind of large Buddhist monastery must have been patronized by the trading community as Pauni was located in the trading network zone.¹⁵ But the ritual landscape within Vidarbha became prominent and flourishing under the Vakatakas. But from this period onwards the ritual landscape surrounding the Mansar – Mandhal site complex appeared as an important centre for the Buddhist monks¹⁶.

Some rock –cut caves are located in the site of Mandhal, where we find reference to the earliest cave with inscriptions in the Vidarbha region. Inscribed lines are—

.....sa vandalaka putasa
Apasala matikamam

Meaning the cave is the work of Apala, the son of Vandalaka¹⁷.

Most of the excavated sites were confined to the Nagpur, Wardha, Yavatmal, Bhandara district. In most of the sites punch marked coins along with the availability of

Northern Black polished wares led the archaeologists to suggest that the sites belonged to the Mauryan period. Thus, it can be stated that though the Mauryas did not establish political control over the region yet the cultural traits that were visible in the Northern India during this time were also visible in the major sites of Vidarbha. Another striking example that this region had contact with the Northern part of India is evident from the excavation report of Kaundinyapura¹⁸. It was in this site we get Northern Black polished ware and punch marked coins were recovered.

From the Mauryan time onwards the sites that came up in the region of Vidarbha were mostly situated in the Wardha-Wainganga valley. The physical landscape of Vidarbha was confined to the river valley largely due to the easy availability of water and fertile soil. This was because of the growth of the agro-based economic structure that came up during this period. The appearance of NBPW, silver and copper-punch-marked coins and the spread of early Buddhism were indicative of the fact that the cultural identity of Vidarbha in the early historic phase was greatly shaped by influences from Northern India¹⁹. Even the penetration of Buddhism was considered to be a Mauryan influence. Though there is no direct evidence of Aśoka sending Buddhist missionaries to this part of Deccan, but it is believed by scholars that Buddhism as religious faith gained strong foothold in Vidarbha from the Aśokan times. The Buddhist stupas on the Jagannath mound of Pauni and the other in Chandkapura give clear evidence of penetration of Buddhism in Vidarbha during the Maurya-Sunga period²⁰. As Vidarbha was an important nodal point in the trading route of Dakṣiṇapatha, it played active role in the inter-regional and intra-regional trading activities. A recent study based on the quantity of ceramics available at important sites of Adam²¹, Bhon²² and Kaudinyapura suggest that there was thriving local and regional exchange in a wide variety of goods²³. This thriving overseas trading activities continued till the Satavahana epoch.

Prior to the establishment of the Satavahana rule in Deccan, the physical landscape was divided into two geo-political units under two local rulers. Based on numismatic evidences it has been suggested that one unit developed centering the Waingangā basin which was under the Bhadrās and the other on the side of Wardha river controlled by the Mitras. Though the Satavahanas had 'nominal domination'²⁴ over Vidarbha but still the process of attaining regional identity was strengthened due to its role in the trading activities. Adam²⁵, Ghugusad²⁶, Nala, Pauni²⁷ and Mansar²⁸ showed the evidence of fortification.

Under the 'nominal domination' of the Satavahanas the physical as well as the cultural landscapes of Vidarbha experienced new developments. It was also the time when the geographical position of Vidarbha was exploited, and it underwent multiple socio-cultural changes. These changes were mainly due to its geographical position that

led Vidarbha to play the role of nodal point in the vast trading network. In Mahabharata Vidarbha had been mentioned in connection to the Dakshinapatha and considered to be an integral part of Dakshinapatha. Vidarbha served as a nodal point in the vast overseas trading network. The several trade routes passing over Vidarbha.

Route 1- Prayag—Bundelkhand—Jabalpur—Wainganga Valley—bank of Godavari—to present day Andhra Pradesh

2- Kausambi—Vidisa—Gonaddha—Ujjain—Mahismati—Prathistha

3- Mathura—Chambal—Ujjain—Mahismati—Burhanpur on Tapi river.

F.E. Partiger²⁹ has described about the journey of Rama up to his visit to the hermitage of Agastya by route one. This route was the easiest and the earliest communicating one connecting Deccan with Northern India. However, the route connecting Paithan became more important in course of time as in the Satavahana period trading activities flourished to a large extent as Paithan was the seat of political power of the Satavahanas.

The Satavahanas were competing with the other contemporary powers like Western Kshtrapas and Bharashivas for gaining control over Vidarbha. Most of the sites that continued to exist in this period were urban in nature with antiquities showing Graeco-Roman affinity. For instance, in Adam pottery assemblage comprised of red ware, decorated pottery having similarity with those found from the sites of Andhra Pradesh where the Satavahanas had control. Roman gold coins, bullae, and variety of seals, sealings and signets are reported. Beads pendants, bangles of ivory, and shell, stylus of chalcedony, figurines of human and terracotta male heads of Graeco-Roman affinity have been excavated.

During the period of what has been called 'nominal domination' of the Sātavāhanas Vidarbha experienced growth in the material culture, most of the sites excavated and explored showed signs of urbanization. The constructions that were found in the excavated sites of Vidarbha are the best examples to justify our argument. Mention may be made of the site of Mansar. At Mansar, period II a solid adhisthan was constructed. of circular coin dies of Gautamiputra – Satakarni. It is from this site that a silver coin of Satakarni has been recovered³⁰.

As already stated, that religious faith like Buddhism and Jainism which were embraced by the trading community penetrated deep into the region of Vidarbha. This cultural trend continued even during the time of the Sātavahanas. From the site of Pauni (Period III and IV) an inscription of the Bhagadatta of Bhara clan has been found. This inscription triggered controversy among the historians³¹. the character of the inscription belongs to the early brahmi alphabets and Prakrit language. Some scholars identified Bhagadatta, the king of the Bhara clan with the Bharasivas. But

Reshma Sawant opined that Bhagadatta was a local ruler probably contemporary to Satavahana.

Early historic sites in Vidarbha seem to have been based on an expanding agricultural economy with a corresponding shift of settlement from hilly/forested regions (Nagpur district) to the fertile river valleys of the Wainganga and its tributaries, the Kanhan and the Dham. There is evidence for the existence of an artisanal class, and monetized economy was well established as we find coins in large number. Studies have shown that the Satavahana coinage drew on preceding coin-making traditions, issuing their coins after incorporating regional symbolism, shapes, metals, and techniques (punch marked). Inter and intra-regional trade connections were probably well established. There is even evidence of trade in Roman goods, which could reflect the forging of links between Vidarbha and the western coast of the subcontinent.

It can be argued that the foundations of this socio-political and economic complexity so apparent in the early historic age had been laid in the megalithic period which witnessed development of unique burial style, ceramic and metallurgy. During this period the region of Vidarbha showed large scale development in socio-economic sector. That was probably the reason why most of the contemporary ruling dynasties were eager to have a minimal control over this region.

During the period from fourth to sixth century CE, Vidarbha witnessed certain prominent internal developments. These internal developments brought changes in the physical as well as in the cultural landscapes of Vidarbha. It was for the first time that Vidarbha came under any political control. With the establishment of Vakataka rule in Vidarbha, new political culture flowed here.

The physical landscape of Vidarbha experienced new internal developments—formation of administrative units, emergence of a strong statehood and expansion in the contour of Vidarbha. All these internal developments played important role in shaping Vidarbha as a region. The system of land grant practiced by the Vakataka rulers also led to the introduction of new elements in the cultural landscape of Vidarbha.³²

Since there was no direct political intervention in Vidarbha prior to this period thus physical landscape was never splitted into administrative units as it happened only with the coming up of the Vakatakas. Moreover, the policy practiced by the Vakataka rulers led to the extension of the contour of Vidarbha. The recipients of these land grants were mainly the brahmanas who spread their ideology to the outlying areas. In this process there was interaction with the cultures of the peripheral people dwelling far from the core area.

It was from the time Pravarasena II that the process of donating lands increased.

This phenomenon clearly revealed the process of political and territorial integration and legitimation in the formation of the Vakataka state. Even the cultural practices of the tribal society were accepted within the folds of brahmanical tradition. The presence of the image of Bhograma (snake deity) in the temple complex of Ramtek indicates such development³³. There was also major change in the settlement pattern, most of sites displayed single cultural layer, and were situated away from the main river valley. It was the time when the attainment of regional identity and state formation went simultaneously. The complex web of socio-economic and political developments from a long period of time was thus involved in shaping Vidarbha as a region. The temple complex of Ramtek is an outstanding example of such cultural development in Vidarbha. Monument and temple building is viewed by archaeologists as an indication of social complexity and also an attempt on the part of the elite to control the mass. The temple building activities sponsored by the Vakataka rulers were commemorative symbols of power exercised upon the newly administered area inhabited by tribal people.

Even the presence of the Kevala – Narasimha temple, in the Ramtek hill is also significant. This temple is noted for its inscription. Significantly, the inscription records the erection of the temple in commemoration of Prabhavati Gupta and the temple was dedicated to Vishnu deity. According to this inscription it was built in the second quarter of the fifth century CE, probably by a daughter of Prabhavati Gupta-Atibavati. This inscription refers to a village Kadalivataka and lands were donated for the purpose of maintenance of the temple. Thus, within the temple complex of Ramtek there was co-existence of high order brahmanical faith along with the local cults.

Conclusion:

There was the emergence of ritual and the political landscapes within Vidarbha led to the growth of new cultural developments which was not witnessed in the earlier period. It brings our attention to the larger territorial area around the Ramtek. Ramtek as a site developed in close proximity to the two important political centers of Vidarbha under the Vakatakas – Nandivardhana identified as Nagardhan and Pravarapura identified as Mansar. This complex of sites surrounding Ramtek was situated not in the Wardha – Wainganga River valley which was considered as the core habitational area of Vidarbha till the third century CE but near the hilly tracts of the Satpura. The site of Ramtek noted for its religious activities attained prominence largely because it was surrounded by purely habitation sites like Mansar, Nagardhan. Both Mansar and Nagardhana during the Vakataka age showed advancement in material culture. It has been claimed by scholars that Pravarasena II, ruler of the Eastern branch of the Vakatakas shifted his capital from Nandivardhana to Pravarapura (Mansar). Period III

of Mansar has been assigned to the Vakatakas. It has been stated by the archaeologist that the Vakatakas occupied an abandoned palace built in the Satavahana epoch, and the only change they brought was the enlargement of the adīsthana and addition of four bastion like square projections³⁴. Unlike Ramtek where Vaisnavism flourished along with the worship of local cults, Mansar as a site yielded temple structure and sculptures belonging to the Saivite cult. Head of an ascetic (believed to be of Shiva) with a series of small linga shrines have been recovered from Mansar.³⁵ Within the complex of Ramtek-Mansar-Nagardhana, proliferation of a diverse religious trend was noticed during this period. As a religious site, Ramtek was supported by these two sites having immense political significance.³⁶ A symbiotic relationship had developed between the temple complex of Ramtek and these two habitational sites with immense political importance. It has been suggested that the nature of the Eastern Vakataka relationship with the agricultural area around Ramtek could have been an adaptive strategy to engage local communities and legitimize Vakataka authority across Vidarbha. The expansion of state society into peripheral areas is suggested to have created a reciprocal relationship whereby the local area was integrated into wider networks and the state was also localized through the incorporation of rural elements.

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