D.D. Kosambi's views on 'combined methods' in Indology and the 'basis' of ancient Indian history

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Abstract: *D.D. Kosambi ('the Father of Indian Scientific History') initiated the Marxist turn in Indian historiography (what Rajan Gurukkal termed 'Kosambi effect) by shifting the focus of study from the ruler, state, power structure towards the common people and mode of production using multidisciplinary approach. Kosambi critiqued both Imperialist and Nationalist historians for perceiving history as a simple stream ignoring the nuances such as the transformation of tribal societies into settled ones. The paper explores Kosambi's ideas with respect to two of his works, namely 'The Basis of Indian History' and 'Combined Methods in Indology'. Kosambi traced the interactions between tribal and settled societies leading to the development of food production and class structure through linguistic analysis of words such as sāmanta and Sātavāhana. He explores the consolidation of the caste system through a socio-economic lens with the help of his model on Feudalism, and with reference to land grants. The paper concludes with a brief description of Kosambi's contribution to the decolonisation of Indian history by removing the elite bias, and his ideas in turn inspiring later stalwarts such as Romila Thapar, and Irfan Habib.*

Key Words: *Kosambi, Combined Methods in Indology, Basis of Ancient Indian History, Marxist Historiography, Caste, From Tribal to Settled Societies.*

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Introduction

The Nationalist historians of early twentieth-century glorified the ancient age in general. They looked for an imperial 'centralised India' during the ancient times such as Mauryas, and Guptas (which was demarcated as the 'Golden Age of India'). K.P. Jayaswal traced the presence of Republicanism in Ancient India through the *Gana Sanghas* or *Gana Rajyas* such as the Shakyas of Kapilavastu. Benoy Sarkar opined that Porus standing up to Alexander was an expression of Indian self or individualism against foreign aggression. Sarkar further worked on pre-1950s Indian historiography focussing primarily on the political aspects such as dynasties and kings, their wars, conquests, and their eulogistic biographies. Written and recorded ('elite') sources were prioritised over others (such as popular oral traditions), resulting in an unbalanced vision of the past.

Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi (1907-1966) the Indian polyglot, cannot be pigeonholed into any particular disciple or tradition. Perceiving history as a part of a larger family of disciples, "the Father of Scientific Indian History" Kosambi introduced scientific study of Indian history using his training in mathematics. He can be viewed as an 'Indologist', who critiqued the British colonial method of interpreting Sanskrit text, examining the evidence in the vibrant pre-colonial Sanskrit scholarship in the sub-continent.

In the era dominated by nationalist scholarship (1950s), Kosambi initiated the Marxist turn in Indian historiography. The focus shifted from polity and administration to economy, society, and culture of the pasts. He defined history as "the presentation, in chronological order, of successive developments in the means and relations of production."[1] Human and class relations evolved over time in a larger context affecting the modes of production promulgating the idea of unity in diversity. Noting the continuity of Indian culture ('long continuity thesis') through contemporary folk traditions, Kosambi remarked, "India is a country of long survivals. People of the atomic age rub elbows with those of the chalcolithic."[2] Due to lack of sources, in the colonial period, often legends (ignoring their embedded history) were incorporated into history like that of King Vikrama's victory in 57 BCE marking an era (i.e., Vikrama Samvat). Kosambi critiqued the philological method used by Christian Lassen and Max Müller to explain the social organisation in Aryan homeland citing the similarity in the word for 'daughter' and dissimilarity in the word for 'milk' among Indo-European languages. Further, he argued that the Aryans being pastoral and patriarchal, milking of animals came at a later stage of development and was initially done by men.[3]

'Combined Methods' in Indology

Indology implies the study of Indian history, culture, society, and languages. It was an attempt at grasping Indian reality by colonialists to justify colonial intervention. The colonial historians applied European notions of change and periodisation to establish Indian society as being changeless, and only perceiving the change in terms of religion stirring James Mill's periodisation- Hindu, Muslim, British.

D.D. Kosambi's multi-disciplinary approach combined philology, fieldwork, epigraphy, anthropology, ethnography, and linguistics to study history. The focus on Brahminical ('elite') texts revealed the ethnographic problem of the fuzzy boundaries between mythology and history. Kosambi addressed the central issues of gender, caste, class, and dialect that were often ignored in contemporary scholarships. The publication of Kosambi's *Combined Methods in Indology* in pre-Islamic Revolution Iranian academic space dominated by French language, explains the use of French quotes in the text.

Kosambi's perception of the contemporary rural peasants as living closer to the past times, than the urban descendants of Brahmins, omits the notion of different paths to progress.[4] It explains the uniqueness of Indian context through the idea of unilinear progress applied in area-specific manner as done by colonial scholars. Moreover, some of Kosambi's linguistic analysis (like tracing back the Marathi village name *Gomāśī*) may be unperceivable to readers without the knowledge of Indic languages.

The regional variations of the cultural idioms of Sanskrit are evident in Patanjali's work such as the changing meaning of the term 'goes'— *śavati* (Kamboja), *hammati* (Surāṣṭra), and *gamati* for "real Aryans."[5] The standardisation of literary Prakrit led to the interchangeability of languages. Obligations of textual sources, meant that the information about society conveyed through them was meant for a specific target audience resulting in more variations at 'popular' level (oral *Jātakas*) than at 'elite' level (literary *Mṛcchakaṭika*) as evident in the incomprehensibility/comprehensibility of the language of *Caṇḍālas* by other characters. Kosambi critiques the European scholars for associating fixed meanings to Sanskrit words and traces the evolution of such terms (like *Sāmanta*) over time, space, and context with examples, making the idea of 'unchanging' concepts redundant. E.g., Ashoka's 5th Rock Edict, and Pali Dictionary of *Rhys Davids*, explains *ibbha* as the lowest of the castes or menials. The third *sutta* of *Dīghanikāya* mentions *ibbha* as a derogatory term. Śaṃkara's commentary of *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* refers to rich person or a lower-caste elephant-driver as *ibbha*. Finally, Kosambi equates *ibhya* with the tribal caste Mātaṅga that originated from people possessing an elephant totem.[6]

Initially denoting 'neighbour' or 'neighbouring ruler,' the term *sāmanta* acquired the meaning of 'vassal' from second-half of sixth-century CE. *Arthaśāstra's* model of a centralised state based on cash economy contradicts the idea of vassalage. Dharasena of Valabhi, the first *mahāsāmanta* in 525 CE, was an independent ruler allied with the Guptas, instead of being a subordinate. The reference to *sāmanta* as the 'feudal baron' first occurs in the Dandin's *Daśakumāracarita*. This was later repeated in Harṣa's copperplates, indicating the cementing of feudal relationships. The prevalence of barter economy from Gupta times, became full-fledged in 7th century CE as evidenced by fewer number of Harṣa's coins. Officials were paid though land grants instead of coins. Kosambi traces the word for battle *saṃgrāma* to the conflict between two Yajurvedic-Brāhamaṇa groups on their transhumance march.[7]

The success of imperial establishments in ancient times was due to superior technology and extensive knowledge of metals, like two-wave Aryan invasion (fast horse-chariot and knowledge of iron) and rise of Magadha as India's 'first universal' empire.[8] The shift from hunting and food-gathering to agricultural economy involving cattle-breeding and plough farming greatly multiplied the population. Kosambi used the invasion argument to explain the origin of casteism. The development of the Brahmins as the dominant caste through interactions between Aryans and the pre-existing Indus valley priesthood occurred at the backdrop of the invasion.[9] Kosambi defined Aryanisation as the progress of plough agriculture in fixed land-holdings corresponding to a new social organisation.[10] Jean Przyluski described Udumbaras as ancient inhabitants of Punjab. The lower-caste Udumbara and the few Udumbara Brahmin of present Gujarat are descendants of the ancient Udumbara tribe who issued coins with the symbol of Udumbara (sacred totem) tree. The presence of few Udumbara brahmins indicate the gradual absorption of a few brahmins into tribal priesthood.

The survival of Brahui speakers in north-western parts is used to testify the existence of a pre-historic Dravidian community all over the sub-continent. Kosambi raises doubt about the grouping together of all non-Aryan, and non-Dravidian languages. Przyluski traces the tribal orgins of the Sātavāhanas through the Prakrit term *sātakaṇi* (Sanskrit *sātakarnī*) as 'son of the horse' indicating the prowess of horse in warfare.[11] The word *Sātavāhana* can be traced to the seven (*saptan/sāta*) sacred horses (*sapti/sāta*) of Sun God Sūrya's chariot (*vahana*). Kosambi traces *sātakaṇi* to *Saptikarṇa* or 'horse-ear' (derived from Munda term for son— 'kon,' and Santhali term for horse— 'sadom') signifying a 'split totem' (*gotrāvayana*) originating from the splitting of an exogamous clan into two or more units. However, in the six Sanskrit examples terminating in *karṇa* mentioned by Kosambi, the ending indicates 'descent from' instead of a split totem.

The reciprocal interaction between the 'tribals' and the 'settled' led to introduction of food production and class-structure among the tribals leading to their gradual assimilation into the settled society. Brahminical tradition grouped together many indigenous traditions as *nāga* ('snake worshippers'). The cobra got associated with Śiva (garland), Viṣṇu (bed and canopy), Buddhist *vihāras* (patron demons). Nagpur owes its name to the *Nāga* tribe. Several local gods were assimilated into the cults of major Hindu Gods, like the absorption of the Jagannatha cult into the Vaiṣṇava tradition. The mother-goddesses (Durga, Lakshmi) were accepted as wives/consorts of the Gods. According to Kosambi, Brahminisation reflected the underlying change from food-gathering in independent tribal units to food-production in an endogamous and hierarchical caste-based society.[12] A type of chattel slavery (owning of human beings and their offsprings as tradeable properties) akin to the Graeco-Roman style prevailed in north-western parts of the sub-continent (Yona, Kamboja) consisting of two interchangeable castes— *Ārya* (free) and *dāsa* (slave) as opposed to the complex caste-system of Gangetic plains. Some words in Sanskrit cannot be traced to either Dravidian or Munda roots— such as *jujube* along with its four synonyms (*kuvala or kola, karkhandu, badara, ghoṇṭā*). Kosambi opined that language as "a means of exchanging ideas" was preceded by "commodity production and exchange."[13]

The 'Basis' of Ancient Indian History

The absence of 'proper' record-keeping, culminated in a lack of chronological history in ancient times (except Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarṅaginī*) as the rituals were passed through oral tradition (*srutis*). Kosambi views the transformation of tribesmen into peasant-cultivators or guild-craftsmen, and tribal lands into agrarian villages as the primary historical change in ancient times, instead of the dynastic changes.[14] It occurred in two processes- the penetration of trade, and the granting of land in tribal domains. Most of the tribes developed Kingship by the Gupta age as they got assimilated into 'settled culture.' The ruler overcame tribal restrictions and developed a broader outlook beyond tribal limits. E.g., Five powerful 'oligarchic-tribal nations' maintained diplomatic ties with Samudragupta Daivaputras, Śāhīs, Śāhānuśāhīs, Śakas, and Muruṇḍas. The modern Ahīr caste are the descendants of Ābhīra tribe that paid tribute to Samudragupta, and displayed all stages of tribal development. The Vākāṭaka tribe developed kingship by the time of Rudrasena II's marriage with Chandragupta II's daughter Prabhatīguptā. Kosambi interprets this marriage establishing an alliance between the two dynasties as an attempt by lesser king Rudrasena II to throw off the last remnants of tribal assemblies' restrictions.[15] During Gupta era, some forest tribes like Bhīl continued to

exist, despite Samudragupta's claim of reducing all forest tribes to servitude (*paricārikī-kṛta-sarvāṭavika-rājasya*).

Brahmins became 'an important tool' for changing status from tribal to settled communities by placing the foundations of absolute monarchy among the tribes, and helping them to establish contacts with the outside world. Kosambi insists that rigid caste system developed only with fixed regular village settlements.[16] Brahminism sometimes adjusted to local customs while assimilating the tribes like the patriarchal Nambūdiri brahmins in Malabar producing offspring for the 'śūdra' matrilineal Nair caste, whose chieftains got recognition as *kṣatriyas*. The Brahmins rewrote puranic records to give a higher lineage to rulers of low origin like the Ikṣvākus of southern Kosala who claimed ancestry from Rāma.

The word 'śūdra' was not a generic term for referring to all lower-castes. Śūdras were labourers who worked as cultivators or artisans, while domestic labour was provided by slaves. Variations of the Sanskrit *grāma* and *pallī* in various Indian village names, indicate its origin as a tribal settlement such as 'Ḍombhigrāma' or settlement of Ḍoms. Kosambi postulated a theory to explain the 'Aryan,' 'Dravidian,' and 'Aboriginal/Tribal' areas. In Aryan areas, the northern immigrants started 'original' plough-agriculture, increasing food-supply, populating rapidly, and attracting labour from surrounding tribes consequently absorbing them. In Dravidian regions, some locals ventured out and returned with 'new knowledge' and agricultural techniques, sometimes becoming brahmins. In aboriginal or tribal areas, the method of plough-farming was not adopted.[17]

He identified two simultaneous processes in the transformation of a tribal chief into a kingdom's ruler. Firstly, the kings used Brahminism to assert their independence from tribal institutions and economy, and to introduce caste as a class division within their domain. Secondly, the Brahmins became a 'cartilage group' between the rulers, and people antagonistic to his or her rule; controlling the society through absorption of local customs, rituals, superstitions, and the service of tribes into their pantheon. In his poems, Bhatrhari concealed his class status using his fear of poverty and unemployment. Kosambi termed these poems as 'literature of escape.' Daniel Ingalls perceived the use of class theory to judge literature as inappropriate.[18]

After the breakup of the Gupta Empire due to the increasing number of autonomous village units, Kosambi identified two stages of feudalism in India- 'feudalism from above' and 'feudalism from below.' In the former, the newly recognised tribal chieftains, local administrators, and occasionally petty invaders become raider-kings being backed by the increasing production of the land grants, while weakening the powers of the centre

at local levels. In the latter, actual judicial and administrative power over village lands was exercised by armed local landed tax-collectors reporting directly to a higher feudal authority instead of the village assembly.[19] This occurred throughout the sub-continent (except Kashmir) during the Sultanate and late-Mughal eras.

Increased trade led to monetisation of the closed village economy, where formerly money had negligible role as taxes were collected in kind. Besides princes, merchants, bankers, others like ploughmen-householders, iron-mongers contributed to rock-cut caves at Kaṅherī, indicating the presence of a monetised economy, as many humble donors traversed long distances. Trade's impact on judicial administration is evident in the strange Jātaka word *lañca* indicating bribe, which is not found in Sanskrit, or early Pali. The close association between Buddhism and trade with Kosambi comparing Buddhist monasteries located along the passes leading down to the coastal plains from the Western Ghats to sentinels guarding them. Hence, besides being staging points for travellers, monasteries also served as nuclei of commercial activities which developed surrounding them such as in Amravati.[20] Merchant guilds also donated for the upkeep of monks. Heavy commodity-production and trade dominated few centres like Jogalthembi, leading to the development of small and rich principalities which were later absorbed by the early Gupta Empire. The self-sufficient village units during Gupta rule, led to increased trade and commodity-production.[21]

Land and village were primarily granted by kings to brahmins, although it was commonly owned, except tribal lands which were treated as territory instead of property. A fifth-century CE inscription records Vākāṭaka ruler Pravarasena granting land in common to about thousand holders of whom forty-nine are named implying their significance. During the beginning of the feudal structure in late-Gupta period the tax-collectors were not powerful, hence less oppressive allowing the villagers greater autonomy than in later feudal times. In opposition to European feudalism, no feudal lords with a manorial estate in countryside, or *demesne* (a piece of land attached to a manor) farming existed in India. Meagrely paid labour called *viṣṭi* during the Mauryas, became *corvée-like* unpaid forced labour for the ruler during the Guptas. The non-brahmin villagers enjoyed pastorage, cattle, salt, and mineral rights, while the brahmin villagers were the 'first settled agriculturalists.'[22]

Despite common ownership a type of individual right in land existed as evident in Dharasena II of Valabhi's grant of various small-sized personal uncultivated or waste (*padraka*) land-holdings in marginal areas to a brahmin Rudrabhūti in 571-72 CE. Individual title among tribals was meaningless as slash-and-burn techniques rendered the soil infertile quickly. Kosambi argues that the title to the *padraka* land

was bestowed to the village as a whole, and Dharasena was merely transferring certain rights of cultivation on behalf of the village.[23] Studying three sixth-century CE Brahmi copper-plate grants from Eastern Bengal, F.E. Pargiter concluded that land was jointly held by all villagers in the first, an individual in the second, and a group in the third grants. Samudrasena's seventh-century charter to Mihireśvara-Kapāleśvara grants a village along with all its resources even its inhabitants (*saprativāsi-jana-sametam*). The 'essential producer' śūdra became quasi-federal serfs tied to the land lacking any individual freedom or agency, becoming property of the tribe as a whole. Between fifth and ninth-centuries, Campā's rulers granted land along with its settlers (*sa-kuṭumbhi-jana*) to religious institutions. Kosambi holds the tribal antecedents, and consequently the *jāti's* unity, as factors preventing the development of serfdom (debt bondage and indentured servitude) and feudalism along European lines in India.[24] Specialised production led to the profitable coconut cultivation in coastal areas gradually making coconut and its by-products like oil a necessity. Supplanting of water-jar (*uda-kumbha*) by coconut in Hindu rituals, displays the absorption of local tradition by Brahminism.

Many post-Gupta land grants being issued from royal camp-headquarters (*skandhāvāra*) indicates that the rulers were regularly on the move accompanied by a peripatetic court. This led to decay of urban centres, and increase in number of comparatively 'self-sufficient' villages culminating in decreasing commodity production as many urban guilds were transformed into rural castes paving the path for development of a feudal structure. Archaeologically this manifested in the replacement of fine silver coins by coarser ones, and simple local pottery in the Gangetic plains substituting the export-quality fine polished black ware. The brahmin colonist acted as an intermediary between the ruler and the villagers, replacing violent force with superstitions to control recalcitrant people. Protests against exploitation took religious undertones, like the Liṅgāyat movement led by Basavanna. The kingdom was made helpless against invasions, once a saturation point was reached as evident in Islamic invasions of northern India. In Kashmir, non-Muslim rulers such as Jayāpīḍa and Harṣa turned against brahmins.[25]

Scholarly Opinion

Irfan Habib remarked that Kosambi's determination to rigorously maintain, and increase the standard of factual and textual research differentiated him from contemporary Indian Marxist historians.[26] Kosambi rejected Marx's 'Asiatic Mode of Production' in the Indian context, as India never passed through a phase of slavery (according to European norms) due to lack of enough surplus and commodity production making extensive

slavery unprofitable.[27] Most of the villages in India lacked metals and salt, which were procured through commercial exchanges, indicating commodity production. Kosambi freely criticised both Nationalists and Marxists (whom he named 'O.M.' or Official Marxists) who toed Party lines.[28] Kosambi opinionated that the adoption of Marx's thesis should not mean constant blind copying of all his conclusions as no single mode of production existed uniformly all over the country at the same time. His primary focus is questions of agricultural technology (heavy or light plough) rather than kingship (king, land grants).[29]

Shereen Ratnagar opines that Kosambi's archaeological breakthroughs were flawed as he perceived archaeology as an extension of history, ignoring the units, and levels of analysis of artefacts.[30] Kosambi's opinion that urban Indus valley society was held together by 'an ideological glue,' instead of forcefully dominating 'elites' represented the classical Orientalist thinking which viewed India as unchanging as opposed to the dynamic West.[31]

Rajan Gurukkal coined the term 'Kosambi effect' to signify the fundamental hermeneutic turn brought about in Indian historiography by Kosambi. The deviation from pre-set theories and ideas formed a key component it. e.g., The fact that Marx spoke of entire humanity, had to be kept in mind while applying Marxism or dialectical materialism in one fraction of it (India). According to Gurukkal, the awareness that a methodology involving a 'systematic, deductively formulated, empirically verified' idea of reality is indispensable to historical knowledge grounded on empirical fundamentals forms the prime component of 'Kosambi effect.'[32] Kosambi's ideas were influenced by his sense of justice and empathy, making his methodology more humanist than Marxist culminating in the dominance of empiricism over theoretical understandings in his writings.

Conclusion

Man is a prisoner of his own times and context. Some of Kosambi's ideas like indirectly affirming the Aryan invasion thesis to support his caste origin theory may appear dated in the 21ˢᵗ century, but these were revolutionary in the 1950s. In *The Basis of Indian History* Kosambi indicates combination of inter-disciplinary methodologies to arrive at a conclusion, while *Combined Methods in Indology* focusses more on linguistics.

For Kosambi social, and economic history were the basis of Indian history, not political history. Hence, C.N. Subramaniam opines, "Kosambi actually set the decolonisation agenda in Indian social sciences."[33] He viewed politics through the socio-economic lens, indicating the transformation from lineage-based tribes to kingship-

based states due to higher level of resource management leading to accumulation of resources and power in the hands of a few. The caste-based labour enabled land colonisation and agriculture.

He introduced innovative methods in numismatics like the 'age-weight correlation' indicating the circulation of lighter punch-marked coins being earlier than heavier ones. This led to the idea of a declining state issuing debased coinage. Kosambi tried to view the past through the lens of the present, as tracing the survival and continuity of India's ancient culture among the folk traditions and linking ancient tribes to contemporary castes (*Ābhīra* and *Ahīr*). Rather than being 'an armchair historian,' Kosambi used extensive fieldworks to supplement texts in his research to better perceive the ever-changing world. He went beyond the established theories and traditions in history, as being evident in his two-stage idea of feudalism. The nuances of Kosambi's thoughts cannot be understood in one reading, hence Romila Thapar suggests at re-reading Kosambi for experiencing the "thrill of being provoked into thinking historically."[34]

Kosambi's training in Mathematics is evident in his systematic organisation of information and logical articulation of those through his arguments. Despite not being a 'trained historian' per se, D.D. Kosambi inspired a paradigm shift in Indian historiography by divorcing it from elite bourgeoisie political culture of Imperialist and Nationalist traditions, and bringing the empirical details of daily socio-economic lifestyles of Marxism. He criticised the overemphasis on Brahminical ('elite') source and Eurocentric notions of historiography, challenging the view of 'unchanging East.' His methodology and ideas later inspired an entire generation of Indian Marxist scholars who became stalwarts in their own right such as Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib.

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