

Threshold Time

The term “Threshold time” has been coined by historian Romila Thapar in her book *Early India* (2002) to analyse the nature of the Gupta Empire in ancient India. Thapar had revised her position time and again in this context. In early 1960 she described the age as of classical pattern. In her survey of 1990s she criticized the Gupta Empire coining some of its achievements as ‘tinsel’. In her latest survey of *Early India* she considered the age as “Threshold Time”. This is a clear marker of the importance of this period in historiography, which is not static but is being continuously reviewed and reshaped by historians.

The Guptas created a large territorial realm which remained more or less stable for three centuries. India witnessed masterly achievements in artistic and literary expressions in this age. This period is also marked by an emergence of multiple belief systems. Fa Hien praised the flourishing material culture of the country during this period which is also indicated in the contemporary Sanskrit literatures. The luxurious and refined lifestyle of the ‘nagarikas’ described in the ‘Kamasutra’ apparently indicates of a prosperous and peaceful India. These are the factors inspired the Nationalist school of historians (R.C. Majumdar, K.M.Srimali, H.C. Raychowdhury, R. G. Basak, A.L. Basham, N. N. Bhattacharyya and H. C. Chakladar, N.R. Ray, S. K. Maity, P.V. Kane, D.C.Sircar) to construct the existence of a ‘Golden Age’ during this three hundred years. This historiographical perspective left deep impressions on subsequent historians.

Only during last five decades a new genre of historians (R.s. Sharma, D.D. Kosambi, D.N.Jha, R.Thapar, B.D. Chattopadhyay, R. Chakrabarty, B. N. Mukherjee) has piled up definite data that the period was far from being an unmixed blessing.. The presence of the downcast communities like the *chandala*, *anatha*(orphan) *atura* (afflicted) *dina* (poor) *kripana* (miserly) barely justifies the label of ‘Golden Age’ to a society supposed to have experienced a paragon of virtues. The favourable impression of Fa Hien about the lenient taxation does not stand scrutiny in the face of the growing number of revenue terms in official records. The condition of the ordinary peasants could hardly have been enviable as he was burdened not merely with various taxes, but also with extr-legal exaction like *Visti*. He creation of the image of the Golden Age was very much promoted by the urge to find parallels to occidental situations. It is impossible to deny the major fruits of the flourishing material life and cultural creativities were meant for the enjoyment of the affluent and the powerful, while the common folk got the trickle of it at the most. The questioning and exploding the myth of Golden Age is therefore is perfectly valid exercise and assertion. This point has been further stressed that at least a part of the achievements of the age was as insignificant as tinsel. If the label Golden Age one extreme of the historical judgment, the last one is to be situated at the other end of the pole.

One needs to remember that while the Roman Empire and the China were both being ravaged by the nomadic depredation, contemporary South Asia showed admirable socio-political and cultural integration, though not bereft of social discrimination and sectarian contestation. This age therefore is

required to be viewed from a different angle. Romila Athapar calls it a threshold period. It carries some items from earlier time, but announces others which take on a more definitive shape in later times. Oral traditions were converted into texts and interpolations added to these. One cannot overlook the fact that the interpretations of these texts and interpolations were made in such a way which surely strengthened the effectiveness of the power of the Brahmins in the society.