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Historical Demography Through Literature : A Preliminary Report on Indian Historical Demography*

Introduction

To do the historical demography of non-Christian populations and societies is rather difficult. Since most non-Christian populations are in the developing countries with little data on their past, some other feasible approaches have to be developed to delve into their demographic past. The case of India is discussed here and the use of literary sources suggested as a means towards that end.

The first question that arises is the usefulness of literature or literary sources. The second question is what types of literary sources yield reliable information on population matters. Unlike the parish registers, the literary sources have a much broader time framework. After all, every country has some hoary literature of its own. Hence, if useful information is available, one can take a country's demographic past to very early times.

Let us look at the first question. We quote from Coser (1972 : xv) :

Literature, though it may also be many other things, is social evidence and testimony. It is a continuous commentary on manners and morals. Its great

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monuments, even as they address themselves to the eternal existential problems which are at the perennial tensions between men and their society, preserve for us the precious record of modes of response peculiar to social and cultural conditions.

Coser goes on to point out the relevance of literature for gaining insights into social processes, which otherwise may not be available to the social scientist through his/her accepted methodology. A fruitful attempt was made by Krishnan (1971) to employ the technique of content analysis of literary products to study the population issues of modern India. Laslett (1965) in his *The World We Have Lost* makes references to demographic information (e.g. age at marriage) gleaned from Shakespearean plays. Conventionally, analysis of literary works is carried out for non-social research (e.g. nature description, style, imagery). But useful and legitimate social and demographic history can be developed from a content analysis of literary products.

The literary works used for socio-demographic studies can be epics, folklore, novels, short stories, essays, poems, biographies, travelogues, etc. We do not include wills, personal diaries, family histories and genealogies in the category. In some instances, there may be an overlap as well. Ordinarily wills and family histories are not in the public domain.

Before we start to present some of the research findings in the context of India, it is worthwhile to stress the limitations of this methodology. We quote again from Coser (1972 : xvi-xvii).

Fiction is not a substitute for systematically accumulated, certified knowledge Literary insights cannot replace scientific and analytical knowledge.

To this, we can add the fact that the writers are not generally of the 'objective' type. Hence the analyst may note biases in the portrayals of events by the novelist, or the poet. These biases may depend on the social class and the family environment of the writer. Hence a word of caution is needed. The results from a content analysis of literary products are suggestive of a reasonable approximation of the state of affairs at that time.

Earlier Attempts on Indian Historical Demography from Literary Works

An overview of the historical demography of India is presented in Krishnan (1979). Using the writings in Sanskrit language, Apte (1965), Goshal (1964) and Kapadia (1966) have thrown light on social, economic, and nuptiality conditions in ancient and medieval India. Raghuvanshi (1969) has utilised the writings of Buchanan, who visited India, to speculate on the age at marriage in northern India in the eighteenth century. The age at marriage for girls had

to be no higher than eleven. For a more detailed survey on age at marriage and how child (or pre-puberty) marriages came into prominence in the subcontinent, see Krishnan (1977). Avalasker (1966) with the help of some old records in Marathi language writes on the occupational distribution and family structure in the village of Nagaon, Kolaba district, Maharashtra state during the period 1760-1840. Avaiasker found Nagaon to be a predominantly upper caste (Brahmin) village. But surprisingly the Brahmins did not confine themselves to their traditional occupation of priesthood, learning and scholarship. They were also active cultivators. Also, the family structure was not of the joint-family type.

Population of India, 300 B.C. to 1871

The picture of social and economic conditions at the time of Akbar the Great comes from Fazal's *Ain-i-Akbari*, a literary work in Urdu. Fazal was a member of the ministry and a poet in the court of the Mugal emperor. Several people have made estimates of the population in the subcontinent (see Appendix I). Pran Nath (1929) estimated the population of Ancient India circa 300 B.C. to be in the range of 100-140 million. Moreland's estimate of the population of Akbar's empire (around 100 million) is further verified by Desai (1972) through an ingenious use of land revenue data. Desai's method has been criticised and has led to further research in this area. Moosvi (1984), through an alternate method, seems to arrive at a slightly larger population figure for pre-partition India circa 1601, 145 million as compared to Moreland's 100 million for the same boundaries.

Immigration into and Emigration from Vedic India

Chandra (1980) in his lucid and controversial book has presented evidence from the *Rig Veda* and reasons, with sufficient backing, that the Aryans were the original inhabitants of India itself and that they migrated from India to other countries, particularly to the West. The Indus Valley Civilisation, Chandra points out, is essentially Vedic civilisation. Thus he refutes the well-accepted Max Mueller theory of the immigration of Aryans into India and their invasion of those who lived in the Indus Valley area at that time. As demographers, we can make the best use of these two opposing points of view. According to Ravenstein's Laws of Migration, every stream of migration generates (has) a counter stream. So, if Chandra's theory is valid, the Max Mueller stream of immigration can be taken as a counter stream. On the other hand, if the Max Mueller stream is the main stream, the Chandra stream is a counter stream. The evidence of outmigration from India has been deduced by Chandra from literary and related (philological) sources from Sanskrit and some European languages.

On Polygyny and Polyandry in Kerala State

The state of Kerala (formerly the states of Travancore and Cochin and the district of Malabar from an area point of view before the integration of states) used to have both polygyny and polyandry systems. The Namboodiri Brahmins, the landed class, restricted marriage to the eldest son in the family and allowed polygyny to the eligible males so that all Namboodiri girls could marry. The Namboodiri boys, deprived of girls from their group took to women from the Nair community, which had espoused the matriarchal system. The origin of the matriarchal system in Kerala has been a much researched topic. The *Sambandham* form of marriage was a kind of polyandry. Through a series of intensive studies of Sanskrit, Tamil, Maiyalara, and Kannada writings, the late Professor Elamkulam Pillai, a Professor of Malayalam Language and Literature at Kerala University, has shown that the circumstances created by the Chola-Chera war in the eleventh century A.D. were responsible for the introduction of this system into the KeraSa social structure. The Nairs were the ones who bore the brunt of the Chera army and the heavy casualties suffered in the war created a severe sex imbalance in their population. In order to save the society from extinction, a selective system of mating Nair women (by Namboodiri men) had to be developed. These findings are available in his two books (Pillai 1970 and 1983). Pillai also has made an estimate of the number of Namboodiri Brahmins living in Travancore at the time of the attack on that state by Tipu Sultan of Mysore (early nineteenth century). Tipu, an orthodox and fanatic Muslim, was converting Hindus to Islam at the point of the sword, when he overran Malabar. The Namboodiris from Malabar and elsewhere had sought refuge in the state of Travancore, which Tipu was unable to conquer.

An Estimate of the Population of India during the Mahabharata War (Circa 3100 B.C.)

Historians are divided on the time-frame of the Mahabharata War. From Chandra (1980 : 99), one can date it around 3100 B. C. For the various dates of the Mahabharata War, see Appendix 2. We shall attempt to estimate the population of India at that time. The data source is the description of the size of the armies that took part in the war. The Epic is in Sanskrit and all the Indian languages have their own vernacular versions.

In the Mahabharata War, the two parties in conflict were the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The Pandavas had seven *akshohinis* of army and the Kauravas eleven (see Amma and Nair 1983 : 207). Thus in all 18 *akshohinis* were involved in the war. An *akshohini* consists of 21,870 chariots; 21,870 elephants; 65,610 horses and 1,09,350 soldiers. The chariot-elephant-horse-soldier ratio is 1 : 1 : 3 : 5. Thus in the Mahabharata War, 18 times 1,09,350 soldiers (i.e

nearly 1.97 million) took part. If we use the ratio of 15-20 persons to one soldier to reckon the population size, as suggested by Pran Nath, the population of India at that time may be estimated to have been in the range 29.6-39.4 million. The Pandava empire covered the present-day territories of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

If we take the Pran Nath estimate of 100-140 million around 300 B.C., we see that the population of Ancient India nearly trebled in some 3,000 years.

Discussion

In this preliminary report, we have shown how literary sources can be used to do both qualitative and quantitative historical demography. We have estimated the population of India circa 3000 B.C. We have noted that these estimates and inferences are only suggestive. More research is needed to check into the reliability of these estimates. By delving into various literary works, one can develop reasonably consistent aspects of India's historical demography. Similar attempts on the populations of other developed and developing countries can lead to useful results in historical population studies.

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APPENDIX I

Estimates of India's Population, 300 B.C.-1871 A.D.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Population</i> (millions)	<i>Source</i>
300 B.C.	100-140	Pran Nath
1600 A.D.	100	Moreland
1800 A.D.	120	Playfair (adjusted)
1834	130	M'Culloch
1843	130	M'Culloch
1855	175	Statistical Abstract of U.K. Possessions (adjusted)
1867	194	Parliamentary Papers (Adjusted)
1871	255	Census (corrected)

SOURCE : Kingsley Davis (1951 ; 25).

APPENDIX II

Date of Mahabharata War (MW)

<i>Indian Tradition</i>	<i>Date of MW or Pandava Period</i>
Aryabhata (a)	3114 B.C.
(b)	3101 B.C.
Bridhyagarga (a)	2434 B.C.
(b)	2448 B.C.
(c)	2458 B.C.
(d)	3077 B.C.
Sptarshi Tradition	2398 B.C.
Kalahana Misra	2448 B.C.
Aihole Inscription	3101 B.C.
Bhaskara	3137 B.C.

SOURCE : A. N. Chandra (1980 : 99).