

---

## The Great Historian D. D. Kosambi

**Prof. Vijay Devidas Wakode**

Assistant Professor

Head of History Department

Shri Dnyanesh Mahavidyalaya, Navargaon

Tah. Sindewahi, Dist. Chandrapur

---

### Introduction :

More than thirty years have passed since the untimely death, at the age of less than fifty-nine, of Professor Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi. Over the later years of his life, but more after his death, Kosambi has gradually emerged as an icon, with his name and work often, and on disparate occasions, invoked by social scientists, journalists and even sometimes by practitioners of contending political ideologies. The image is that of a pioneer of genuine Marxist scholarship of the Indian past, that of the 'father of Scientific Indian History' who effected a 'paradigm shift' in Indian historical studies; at the same time, he is also viewed as a nasty iconoclast with a 'pre deterministic' approach, imposing an alien framework and an inappropriate perspective on Indian cultural heritage, as an excuse for rationality. His writings are only selectively read and cited; in historiographical assessments when Marxist departure is highlighted as a point of significant contrast with imperialist and nationalist modes of thought, the discourse usually begins with him. And yet, curiously, after so many years since his death, no sustained debates on his works and the intellectual position that he represented are available. One reason for this may be that despite the ready availability of some of his writings, many of his important essays remain housed in a select number of libraries, in Journals which vary greatly in their contents. In addition, an integrated view of Kosambi who was by university education, profession and professional research a mathematician, and at the same time, an indefatigable Ideological researcher, perhaps can never be satisfactorily achieved. A review of his work on Mathematics, Statistics and Genetics in combination with what his Ideological contribution amounted to would be indeed a tall order even for someone with genuine admiration for Kosambi. For the present, we have to direct our query only towards the genesis, range and significance of his Ideological interests alone.

Was Kosambi an 'amateur Ideologist' a dilettante with superficial expertise and interest, making generalizations on India's past, often irreverent, by fitting inadequate data into the straitjacket of Marxist theory? Kosambi himself would have us believe that his entry into Ideology was fortuitous, a 'descent through the roof'.

Study of the records meant knowledge of Sanskrit, of which I had absorbed a little through the pores, other preoccupations made it impossible to learn the classical idiom like any other beginner. So, the same method was adopted as for the study of statistics: to take up a specific work, of which the simplest was Bhar-trhari's epigrams (subhasitas). The supposed

philosophy of Bhartrhari, as glorified by commentators, was at variance with his poetry of frustration and escape. By pointing this out in an essay which caused every godfearing Sanskritist to shudder, I fell into Indology, as it were, through the roof.

And yet, going beyond what Kosambi himself says, it may be possible to trace the genesis of Kosambi's serious interests in Ideology, History and a variety of other disciplines through the growth pattern of his intellectual makeup. Kosambi was educated mostly in the United States, both during the tenure of his father on Harvard Faculty, and after, and his training both in Harvard Law School and, as a mathematics student in Harvard University, helped him develop an amazing skill with languages. Some evidence of this skill can be seen in the references cited by him, but what one gathers from his biography and reminiscences of his friends and contemporaries, the languages that he knew well included Sanskrit, Pali, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, German, French, Italian, Portuguese and Russian in addition to, of course, English and Marathi. He had an easy access therefore to a really wide range of publications an advantage which many of Kosambi's contemporary Ideologists did not have and Kosambi did make full use of his expertise in both his Mathematical and Ideological works. Combined with command over languages was Kosambi's wide range of interests an eclecticism which appears to have been encouraged by his scholar father. This is how one of his Harvard contemporaries describes Kosambi's room of Harvard student days:

'The room was lined with bookshelves filled with the widest imaginable variety of things. I recatdllgemeine Sprachenkunde (a book on linguistics), copies of the Bible in Latin, Greek and German, and other languages (which he liked to om-pare as language practice), a large number of paperbacks of French, Italian and German literature, as well as books in Indie languages, and of course scientific books, mostly in German.□

Itis true that Kosambi did not learn Indology in a classroom situation, but he did lear Sanskrit to the extent of being able to prepare model critical editions of several Sanskrit texts, and this by no means suggests casual entry into the field of Indology. Kosambi himself has been several times uncharacteristically modest about the quality of his command over Sanskrit, but let me cite another authority, J.L. Masson, whose translation of the Sanskrit drama Avimaraka came out in 1970:

He [Kosambi] told me he had been interested in A vimaraka for some time and had in fact done some research on the rather peculiar name (sheep-killer), He suggested that we collaborate on a work; he would write a long introduction which would investigate the anthropological data concerning the name, and { would include the translation of the play. I agreed and we sat down to re-read the play together in Sanskrit, checking it against my translation, We did this for a period of two weeks. During this time several passages in the translation profited from the astonishing range of Kosambi's scholarship. Wherever he has actually changed my previous translation I have noted this in the textual notes.

'The making of Kosambi as an Ideologist has to be ultimately traced to his family' long-standing pursuit of traditional learning, his easy capacity to acquire language skill, his wide range of academic interests, and, above all, his penetrating curiosities about the world and the society around him, Kosambi had an abiding admiration for the way his father, a

renowned scholar of Buddhist scriptures and editor of the Buddhist text *Visuddhimagga* for the Harvard Oriental Series, worked; he has made pointed references to the method of his father's work and to his father's writings on the Buddha and Buddhism. It is likely that in the intervening year between his return from and return to Harvard for his undergraduate studies, Kosambi was associated in some ways with his father's work at Puratattva-Mandir of Gujarat Vidyapith which was being organized by Mahatma Gandhi, His admiration for Gandhiji, his closeness to his father's friend acarya Muni Jinavijaya, renowned Jaina scholar who later introduced two of Kosambi's editions of Bhartrhari to the scholarly world," and his contact with people involved in the Indian national movement around the middle of the twenties must have made Kosambi directly aware of Indian affairs at this stage, despite his long years in Harvard. As a young member of the Mathematics Faculty at Banaras Hindu University (1929-31) and later at Aligarh Muslim University (1931-32), Kosambi may be seen to have started exploring the ancient sites and monuments in the areas of Benaras and Aligarh; the mature phase of his archaeological fieldwork in the Deccan, which covered a long chronological span to include microliths, megaliths, early historical Buddhist cave sites, and medieval temple centres, had their modest beginning in north India since the time of his return to India.

During his tenure at Fergusson College, Pune (1933-47), Kosambi's piece of literary criticism *The Quality of Renunciation in Bhartrhari's Poetry* came out in 1941 in Fergusson College Magazine. His work on Bhartrhar's text, which resulted in the publications of four separate editions, began in 1943. The preparation of these editions involved painstaking research" slow and monotonous" a source of major strain on both physical stamina and financial resources. But it was this work which was to earn him the distinction of being invited to edit Vidyakara's *Subhasitaratnakosa*, another work of Sanskrit anthology, from inadequate photocopies preserved in Tibet and Nepal, for the Harvard Oriental Series."\*

I have so far focused intermittently on Kosambi's handling of Sanskrit texts, because I believe that preparation of a critical edition of a text is crucial, if not the ultimate, test of expertise, of perseverance and of scholarly integrity. The collation of a number of manuscripts, with considerable variations and at different conditions of preservation, involves not only the capacity to compare and select, but also knowledge of paleography, and awareness of the possibility of existence of strata within a text. While editing a text or weighing coins on a scale, Kosambi was concerned with the minutest detail. Kosambi, and historians with a Marxist orientation in general, have often been accused in India of ignoring hard data or making generalizations without familiarity with sources and facts. Irrespective of whether one accepts his historical generalizations or not, Kosambi did train himself to respect facts. Commenting on this aspect of Kosambi's scholarship, Daniel Ingalls, Harvard Sanskritist and one of the severest critics of Kosambi's literary assessments, wrote in his reminiscences:

What I admired in Kosambi was his instinctive respect for facts, I would almost call it a reverence, that would come into play even when I least expected it. To listen to him

theorize on Indian history you might think he believed himself to have an understanding of its every turn. But no; he still had the patience to weigh on a jeweller's scale each new lot of punch marked coins that came into his hands; he would still worry for hours over which of five manuscript variants to choose for a critical text. This side of Kosambi's character, the truly scholarly side, made no great flash in the world. But to Kosambi it was part of his inner morality.

It was this inner morality which made Kosambi acknowledge and appreciate, with humility, those text-workers whose works, he thought, merited acknowledgment and appreciation.'

### **Ancient India and D. D. Kosambi**

'The making of an Indologist does not explain the making of an historian. The texts critically edited by him were received with high acclaim in scholarly circles, but it is as the author of *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, *Myth and Reality*, and *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* that Kosambi's approach and formulations regarding India's past are recognized, discussed and disputed. The enigma of the making of Kosambi as an historian is also the clue to understanding the way he developed his approach to Indian history.

Despite his long engagements with texts Kosambi was time and again critical about texts, or written records alone for that matter, as the sole source of knowledge about India's past; constructs of India's past based on texts alone produced only a 'tunnel vision' of history. Texts also tended to be interpreted from the perspective of India as the changeless East stereotype. Despite his deep admiration for the profound philological scholarship of many European and Indian text-workers, he was thus a severe critic sometimes of their interpretations of textual terms. Meanings of words could and did change as did historical reality. What the texts were seen to give was the vision of an essentially unchanging world or universal truth about the entire society. Kosambi was particularly fond of repeatedly citing the high incidence of widow remarriage among Maharashtrian common people of his times, whereas the social reformers of the nineteenth century were hard put to finding evidence of widow remarriage in ancient Sanskrit texts in order to legitimize their movement for its practice in contemporary society. Another custom of high incidence in Maharashtrian society, cited by him, is that of the payment of bride price of which there is clear reference in the Mahabharata in relation to the country of the Madras, but which is deliberately obfuscated and derided as a non-Aryan practice by the Brahmin organizers of texts.

Clearly then there is a mismatch between the textual reality as it is constructed and contemporary Indian reality, and, to Kosambi, it is contemporary Indian reality alone (because of the encapsulation within it of many stages of history) which can make us try to understand the past reality, both of written records and what is available outside written records.

This is not too difficult in a country where contemporary society is composed of elements that preserve the indelible marks of almost every historical stage. The neglect of such analysis leads to a ridiculous distortion of Indian history and to a misunderstanding of

Indian culture, not compensated by subtle theology or the boasts of having risen above crash materialism ~Contemporary reality being an encapsulation of many historical stages, what were the alternatives to written records alone for a study of these stages? One obviously was fieldwork, to observe and analyze the tremendous diversity in contemporary reality and to understand the way the past has continued and acquired new connotations in the present. The history one is talking about is then different from the history currently reconstructed, on the basis of written records alone. Kosambi's remarks explain this But what is history? If history means only the succession of outstanding megalomaniac names and imposing battles, Indian history would be difficult to write. If, however, it is more important to know whether a given people had the plough or not than to know of the name of their king, then India has a history The other was Marxism. For Kosambi Marxism was the only acceptable philosophy as a guide for desired change in the contemporary world, but it was also the correct perspective for understanding patterns of change in Indian history. Both Kosambi's fieldwork and Marxism need a little further clarification. There have been some misgivings about Kosambi's notion of survival which is inextricably connected with his statements about fieldwork, for his use of survival has been interpreted to mean both unilinear evolution in which survival refers to the poor remnant, and, therefore, there is value-judgement on what has survived. There is a certain measure of value-judgement, in terms of what Kosambi would consider efficiency of production and social complexity, in the way he viewed survivals; to him, plough-agriculture is certainly an advancement upon pre- plough economy. But survival in a broader sense relates the cultural significance of tradition located in the life pattern, beliefs and practices of living communities to the totality of existing societal pattern itself and not in isolation from it; sometimes what has come down from the prerecorded past has outlived, although with new meanings, more ephemeral historical stages. Kosambi refers to the mother cult of Lum-bini, antedating the birth of the Buddha, at the sacred grove where the Buddha was born and thereby became an object of veneration among the Buddhists. When Kosambi was writing, the Sakyas and the Buddhists had gone, but Lumbini continued to be venerated as the centre of the mother cult. Survival then means the vertical continuity of myriad cultural elements, in a state of flux, through Indian history which has thus to be understood with reference to both recorded and unrecorded evidence. Place names, cult centres, festivals all were ingredients of history: all had distinct meanings for understanding the present in relation to the past. History then has to be studied in the field, but one has to understand that by fieldwork Kosambi was not referring to archaeological investigations alone. One suspects that this is where he was somewhat sceptical of the work, being done in his time, by professional, institution- based archaeologists. In a letter, dated July 30, 1961, Kosambi wrote, commenting on his own fieldwork: also was an observer, though the questions I asked and the sites inspected by us had a purpose developed from long experience, The main intention was always to investigate the relation of modern Indian life (at the lowest levels) with the Brahmin-recorded tradition; and also to study the transition from prehistory to history.

This essentially should be the meaning of his fieldwork and of his survivals in the plural; the survivals, their meanings and the way they together, in their journey through

history, constitute the present, can alone make Kosambi's notion of historical change in India in Marxist terms understandable,

### **Culture and Civilization**

There is a genuine reason why further discussion on this is necessary. The reason is that there was indeed a big difference between how other -xist Indologists used the concept of the 'Mode of Production' and how Kosambi was trying to use it in the Indian context." In referring to Kosambi's historical approach, and in comfortably and securely keeping him ensconced in a Marxist basket, the following statement made by him in both his Introduction and Culture and Civilization is, following Kosambi himself, underlined: 'History is the presentation in chronological order of successive changes in the means and relations of production' He, however, went a step further and himself clarified: 'Our position has also to be very far from a mechanical determinism, particularly in dealing with India, where form is given the utmost importance while content is ignored. Economic determinism will not do. It is not inevitable, not even true, that a given amount of wealth will lead to a given type of development. 'The complete historical process through which the social form has been reached is also of prime importance'

'The complete historical process through which the social form has been reachedâ could be, if one follows Kosambi writings closely, understandable in terms of the way he himself interpreted the Marxist framework of historical change, the mechanism of change in existing Indian historiography available to him having been through wars, conquests, dynastic shifts" the agency of change, in other words, being the activities of those he called megalomaniac, I shall make further comments on Kosambi's Marxism in relation to his vision of historical change later, but it may be noted here that Kosambi was contemptuous of both Soviet and Indian Marxist attempts to delineate social formations and social change in early India, To him, "the complete historical process was the uniquely Indian process, to be explained by the logic of Indian societal developments and in terms of Indian cultural elements, culture being understood in the sense of the ethnographer, to describe the essential way of life of the whole people. □

In developing his ideas about the trajectories of historical change in India, and of Indian history in general, it must be noted, Kosambi did not really have a working model before him. He did, in his writings, refer to archaeologists and ancient historians with leftist orientations; he had particular admiration for the works of George Thompson on early Greece. In 1965, in his Culture and Civilization, he was quoting approvingly, EH, Carr's statement that "the function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them." But, then, this is what Kosambi was himself trying to achieve, in his fieldworks through the fifties and early sixties, observing, recording and analyzing the tradition which was living in relation to meanings from the remote past, underlining the reciprocal relevance of the contemporary and the past.

In his Preface to An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, Kosambi wrote: This book does not pretend to be a history of India. It is merely a modern approach to the

study of Indian history ... To this end, the examples given here have been intensive, from my own (necessarily restricted) experience and reading.

Kosambi's approach to Indian history started with the admission that no chronological history of India, in the way European or Chinese history was written, was possible, although his Introduction did have a chronological outline (xvii-xix) corresponding to the order in which the ten chapters of the book were arranged. His historical approach was founded on a chronological perspective which was his response to the absence of chronology and events in Indian history; even if Indian history could not be written with the content of historical events and narrative continuity as in European or Chinese history, an alternative history was still possible. Construction of such a history obviously involved altering the approach,

Even though the framework for this alternative approach was provided by Marxian successive developments in the means and relations of production obviously Marx had not worked it out in the context of India, and, in any case, nor was Kosambi entirely satisfied with Marx's characterization of pre-colonial Indian society. Since also, Marxism is not a substitute for thinking the approach present in Kosambi's overview of Indian history has to be regarded as representing his own thinking. It may be interesting to quote here a few lines from the beginning of chapter VII of his Introduction, titled 'The Formation of a Village Economy'; this is a chapter which actually deals with the period of the Mauryan.

#### **Empire:**

The last three chapters drift away from the definition of history given at the beginning of this work. The reader may be lost in the text critical morass presented by tenuous legendary material uncollected with archaeology. The fact is clear that Magadha emerged as the dominant Gangetic state, ruining alike petty Vedic kingdoms, Aryan tribes neither known to nor following the Vedas, and aborigines not yet Aryanised. The awareness that he had drifted from the definition of history is an admission of the need to do so, since simply providing a definition of history does not resolve the task of reconstructing history's specific trajectories. Reconstructing the route to Magadha's ascendancy at a particular phase in early India involved making sense of tenuous legendary material and situating this sense in the context of an over-view. His Alternative Indian history thus in a sense does not automatically flow from a definition of history as such, but, following from that basic definition of change, to the formulation of a series of questions which would relate to the society one was studying:

Thus the more important question is not who was king, nor whether the given region had a king, but whether its people used a plough, light or heavy, at the time, The type of kingship, as a function of property relations and surplus produced, depends upon the method of agriculture, not conversely, What was the role of caste in breaking up tribal groups to annex them to society? Where did the metals come from? When did commodity exchange crops like coconut become important; what relations did they have to communal and private land-holdings? Why have we no large-scale chattel slavery in the classical period, no proper serfdom in the feudal? What is the reason for the survival of Mesolithic rites, continued

worship of stone-age gods even today among all classes? These questions have at least to be raised, their answers worked out as far as possible.□

The questions posed are not exhaustive, but they do reflect a particular accent, and they amount not to a narrative history of India but to a particular way of choosing, organizing and interpreting data. Except marginally, data from many regions, such as the south, remain unrepresented in his writings, but one must remember Kosambi's initial statement in the Introduction that he was not writing a history of India. His substantial chapter The Heritage of Preclass Society in the Introduction is, for example, not an up-to-date survey of the pre- and protohistorical cultures of India unrelated to other chapters, but an attempt, in the form of a synthesis of his many other writings, to understand the productive and ideological roots of Indian society as they could be analyzed from archaeological evidence and living traditions.

It is not necessary to present here a summary of Kosambi's historical writings, but his accent not being on narrative history but on changes of modes through which society reproduces itself, it is imperative that we understand in what ways he was consistently differing from those others who too seemed to have worked with the same approach. The difference would be clear from the way Kosambi dismissed the writings of both D.A. Suleikin and S.A. Dange' on the formation of early Indian class society. Kosambi's work on this had to follow the course of Indian evidence chronologically, through the Indus valley civilization, the Aryan Society of the Vedas, to the ascendancy of Kosala and Magadha, before the emergence of the first Indian empire—the Mauryan empire. In the Indian context, he argued, in terms of the evidence available it would be absurd to postulate a passage from Primitive Communism to Slavery: If we wish to study the oldest Indian communities, the fact has to be faced that those {of whose antiquity and means of production we have any certain knowledge have passed far beyond the primitive, into civilization.

### **Kosambi and Feudality**

The contrast between Indus valley society with the fully developed city of such magnitude with all its high technique and the complex social organization thereby implied and the Aryan society," despite continuities of earlier cultural elements into Aryan society, is important for two reasons: (a) Aryan society's productive basis included horse, iron and plough, and therefore had more effective ways of creating a coercive state, and (b) the formation of the Sudra varna, representing the basis of labour service in society. Because of the Caste System, Kosambi wrote, India had helotage, not slavery. Thus Dange's very title is wrong, for his sources contain neither primitive communism, nor slavery. State formation, crystallizing in the establishment of the Magadhan empire, is crucial as the basis of this class society because the state is directly involved in the creation of the true village which is the foundation of the state, through Sudra labour.

Kosambi saw feudal development in India almost as inevitability, but although a substantial part of his Introduction and other writings were devoted to the elaboration of his ideas on Indian feudalism, there has hardly been an attempt to analyze them and place them in the context of the differences of approach. To continue therefore with the context of differences, Kosambi had serious reservations about what may be called the K.A. Antonova



model of Indian Feudalism.\*' According to Antonova, who based her reconstruction of the chronology and structure of feudalism on the practice of land grants, feudalism began to develop in India in the fifth to the seventh centuries; from the land grants of the 7th- 8th centuries, we see that the system of feudal hierarchy is already established ... in future these land grants will reflect the struggle between the feudal lords and the burghers (of the middle ages) for their domination in towns.

Kosambi's major criticism of this reconstruction, apart from pointing to the incorrect use of land grant evidence, is that it does not take note of the specific features of Indian development from the fourth century onwards: The presence and decay of extensive tribes, the new functions of caste and Brahmanism, the real growth of plough agriculture plus village settlement all over the peninsula, rise of trade volume inspire of decrease in commodity production per head, do not appear here at all. Why Brahmin in the earlier period was the almost exclusive (emphasis in the original) recipient of land grants was not explained by Antonova to whom, as a serious materialist historian caste was of no importance. For Kosambi, this throws away what little remains to us of source material in Indian history, for caste is an important reflection of the actual relations of production, particularly at the time of its formation (emphasis in the original). On the use of land grants, Kosambi's comment was: If such gifts constitute evidence for feudalism, then feudalism in India has to be put nearly a thousand years earlier than Antonova has done. Also chronologically, not only do burghers fail to appear, but the individual merchants who might have become burghers sometimes turned into feudal lords.

Kosambi's feudalism extended from the early Christian centuries to at least the eighteenth century, and in references to Kosambi, it is customary simply to mention briefly his idea of the evolution of the feudal formation in two stages: Feudalism from above and Feudalism from below without relating the totality of his references to Feudalism to his characterization of the two stages. For one thing, Kosambi often used such expressions as 'Primitive feudalism Pure feudalism'; 'Simple feudalism' Mature feudalism which would, it can be assumed, correspond to his two-stage scheme of feudal development, which is better expressed in his own words:

Feudalism from above means a stage wherein an emperor or powerful king levied tribute from subordinates who still ruled in their own right and did what they liked within their own territories as long as they paid the paramount ruler. These subordinate rulers might even be tribal chiefs, and seem in general to have ruled the land by direct administration, without the intermediacy of a class which was in effect a land owning stratum. By feudalism from below is meant the next stage where a class of landowners developed within the village, between the state and the peasantry, gradually to wield armed power over the local population. This class was subject to military service, hence claimed a direct relationship with state power, without the intervention of any other stratum. Taxes were collected by small intermediaries who passed on a fragment to the feudal hierarchy, in contrast to direct collection by royal officials in feudalism from above. In both cases, remnants of previous systems survived (locally or in form) down to the food gathering tribe. The basic difference between these two stages derives from the slow increase of trade and commodity production.

Pethaps Kosambi's own discomfort with the way he conceived feudalism, which will be mentioned in the next section, derived from its long chronology and assumed inevitability of some feudal developments. The other problem is that his own definitions and chronology would often not match his evidence. For example, if his earlier feudalism from above was essentially a type of political feudalism, then the Satavahana period inscription of the middle of the second century AD from Myakadoni that he refers to, with clear indication of the existence of superior rights at the level of the village of Vepuraka, in their relationship with military service, would be a negation of that kind of feudalism and a more appropriate evidence for his feudalism from below. His dating of the crystallization of feudalism from below from the reign of Firuz Tughlag in the fourteenth century "after several false starts" becomes equivocal when one relates this to his almost absolute and confident dating of samanta as feudal baron between the middle and the close of the sixth century, or to his reference to "Pure feudalism, beginning in the later Gupta period but enormously stimulated by Muslim trade and military penetration after ap 1200."

Despite this equivocation, which is so atypical of Kosambi's writings, feudalism in the way he formulated it in sharp contrast to the feudal mode of others, remains an integral part of his approach. The approach set an agenda, and the historiographical significance of this agenda lies in the fact that at least among Indian historians of India's early past, the issues raised by him, such as those bearing upon the legacy of pre-literate society; the nature of Rgvedic society and the presence in it of non-Aryan elements; iron technology and social change; state formation and varna; changes in the structure of the Buddhist samgha and the locational pattern of rock cut cave monasteries; the social significance of the ideology of Bhakti; and the character of what is seen as Indian feudalism continue to be major historical themes to be researched upon and debated.

### **The classical Age and D. D. Kosambi**

In what sense, then, does one take Kosambi's work to suggest a real departure a paradigm shift" from past historiography? Answers to a question like this are bound to be subjective, largely depending on the position one takes in relation to a much refined historiographic scenario in the dying decade of the twentieth century. But to see Kosambi's work solely in the light of contemporary historiography and not by situating it in the context of the period in which he was working would be travesty of historiography itself, made worse by bracketing him with a host of other Marxist historians, as if his work must need be weighed only on a Marxist scale.

The historiographical situation, up to the middle of the fifties, as Kosambi saw it, was dominated by official and fashionable histories:

Beginning with Vincent Smith's Oxford History of India (with its praise for strong empires of all sorts) and finishing as of 1954 with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Age of Imperial Unity and The Classical Age. These books start with an incredible slender foundation of valid data, on which an imposing superstructure of conjecture, mere verbiage,

and class-fashions is erected; of course, the class is no longer the British but the Indian bourgeoisie, which strives desperately to produce a history as respectable as that of the foreigner in his own country.

The monumental nationalist project of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan to write India's history in several volumes achieved, according to Kosambi, only an inversion of the premises of European historiography and of European historical scholarship on India. I would venture to suggest that the major breakthrough that Kosambi's work signified was to free Indian history from the tyranny of European historiography. One may object to this statement by pointing to the numerous references in Kosambi's writings to European mythology, to European practices, and to his free use of terms like baron, vassal, serf, 'feudalism' 'bourgeoisie', etc. in the Indian context. One should however keep in mind the entire corpus of Kosambi's writings while evaluating their use. Kosambi obviously viewed history in comparative terms, but contemporary society and culture in India being so different from anywhere else, the actual processes of the formation of that society and culture had to be understood in its own terms. Political or dynastic history, administrative, constitutional or legal history by themselves, and in isolation, were not important to him as they were to nationalist historians whose mode! was derived from European historiography. The difference in conceptual frame meant redefining the scope of historical enquiry; it meant shifting the focus from what was being routinely studied and highlighting new areas of priority.

Kosambi's shift to society and culture in its entirety, both past and present, including within its ambit the elites and the marginals alike," was a redefinition of the scope of history and therefore redefinition of the sources of historical knowledge. Conventional sources would no longer suffice, and, in any case, could no longer be studied in isolation. The shift had to be to 'Combined Method': using what would today be called ethno-archaeology, anthropology, mythology, as well as fresh analyses of meanings of words in written records. It would be simplistic to attribute these shifts to a particular historical approach unless the actual working of the method can be demonstrated, and, it would seem that with Kosambi the actual work began by asking questions. To repeat a point made earlier by citing his series of queries in Introduction, in his critique of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan project too Kosambi commented:

When did regular coinage appear? What, in particular, did Asoka's coins look like? The answer exists, but one finds nothing about punch-marked coins in the entire work. What was the essential difference between Mauryan and Gupta empires, if any? Why did the latter produce great Sanskrit literature, not the former? On the other hand, why do Buddhism, Jainism, the Ajivikas, and so many other contemporary religious sects of the type arise in Magadha, all becoming prominent at about the same time? Does this have no connection with the imperial expansion of Magadha, of which so much is made in volume II? Why had Patna, once the greatest city in the world, dwindled to a pair of villages by the time of Hiuen Tsang though the surrounding countryside was quite as productive, fertile and prosperous as before? Why did the Greek Menander not try to introduce the Greek way of life (or at least something

like the Athenian academy) into the country; why did he and so many Yavanas, Sakas and other foreigners turn to Buddhism or Hinduism? Why did this trend suddenly change with the Islamic conquest “yet gradually reappear by the time of Akbar in a totally different manner?”

Obviously, no historian can say everything that happened, having often to select from sources that have already selected what seemed important enough for them to be recorded but, even so, any serious history to be considered a worthwhile enterprise ought to be able to raise and answer relevant questions. The very names of our numberless castes, the innumerable local superstitions practised by Brahmins with rewritten scriptures or without any reference at all to scripture, attest the mutual interaction of tribal and agrarian society. But the nature of tribal cultures, the various methods whereby the advance to a general society beyond the tribe was achieved, receive no consideration whatever from the Bharatiya Vidya group, which thus discards the main achievement of ancient Indian history.

The paradigm shift then has to be understood in terms of Kosambi’s redefinition of the scope of history, which broke down the compartmentalization of earlier history, in terms of his designing integrated methodology for harnessing diverse sources and in terms of his emphasis on asking questions which these diverse sources and the society they emanated from alone could generate. If they together constituted a thoroughly new approach, they also meant breaking down of the sharp barriers between periods of history, of the entrenched notion of fixed periods, Kosambi does occasionally and loosely use such terms as Muslim period, but in his long-distance vision of Indian history, there were only remain advances not replacement of one period of Indian history by another.□ If markers of change were to be identified, they had to be not in the form of sharp

### Conclusion :

Kosambi’s social concerns, backed by academic homework, extended to such diverse areas as overpopulation and birth control, fertilizers, solar energy and reforestation (â€˜indispensable for good agriculture, and water-harvesting for purposes of irrigation:

Neither the engineers, nor the Planning Commission, would consider a more important suggestion, namely, that many cheap small dams should be located by plan and built from local materials with local labor. Monsoon water would be conserved and two or three crops rose annually on good soil that now yields only one. The real obstacle is not ignorance of technique but private ownership of land and lack of cooperation among the owners.

The reality however was thus very different from what he wanted it to be, He was impatient with the reality as he perceived it, and with human failures resulting from superficiality, inefficiency and hypocrisy. The sharpness of Kosambi’s style, one aspect of which was perhaps euphemistic ally referred to by A.L. Basham as â€˜concise was really a reflection of his impatience with what he found unbearable: be it in the understanding of

Marxism or its applications, squabbles even over such noble movements as peace movement or in bureaucratic unconcern, How bitter his critique could be can be seen from what he wrote to Daniel Ingalls on the question of the distribution of research grants:

What you say about the grant comes painfully home in several ways, Our fertile but whimsical Kainadhenu, the government, can be milked for streams of cash, if one does it on a sufficiently large and useless scale, The man who needs 500 for some really useful work is a common swindler, a scheme for 10,000 might get through with heavy backing. In the hundred thousands it becomes routine; and by the million, you not only get everything you ask for, but are certainly a public benefactor, provided the money all goes down the drain.□

If this was one, bitter, side of human sensitivity, then there was also the other, the unexpectedly soft core, where Kosambi's style of expression" in his behaviour towards his young associates with whom he could spend hours teaching Greek history or undertake arduous archaeological explorations over difficult terrains, in his closeness to his family or in his touching loyalty to friends" found outlet in a different kind of language altogether. Contrast the tone of the above letter with the last lines of the Introduction to a book which he dedicated to his mother At a time when my health and finances were both ruined, and the work would have been suspended, she put at my disposal, unsolicited, the "meager savings of a lifetime devoted to the service of her children, To these funds, given without condition in the disappointed hope that I should use them to improve my health, this edition owes its very existence. A matron in the noblest Indian tradition, one to whom even Bhasa's broken hero of the shattered thigh, abandoned on the field of battle, might pray with his dying breath, "If merit be mine and rebirth fall to my lot, be thou again my mother she deserves to have a far better work dedicated to her, just as she deserves a far better son, However, if she will condone the shortcomings of the book as she has those of the child, both are hers.

A rational idealist, with deep human compassion within, is usually ultimately a broken man, Kosambi's ideals obviously were going to remain unrealized. He withdrew from the peace movement, but his fierce opposition to the nuclear programme resulted in tensions, of which his job was probably a casualty.□ Being finally nominated a Scientist Emeritus of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, after squabbles of the nature of academic politics, was no major compensation. Field work sporadically continued till the early sixties, but problems of finance, logistics and those caused by nagging arthritis combined to make things difficult for him at the late stage of his life.

But, what one can be sure about is that Kosambi would never have fallen in line with Bhartrhari, the poet he continued to study so thoroughly till the end: anti-elitist Kosambi's impatient comments on Bhartrhari's despair born out of poverty would only be: this is poverty of the intelligentsia; not of the proletariat, the pamera who has nothing to live by except the hard labour of his scabby body; with him the poet feels no kinship ... Our poets had long past the stage when they would burst into song for the sheer joy of being alive.□ In his assessment, the florid Sanskrit poet or his hedonist patron compares unfavourably with Bunyan's valiant pilgrim: For him, death had no sting, over him the grave could claim no

victory only those prepared to put up ~constant struggle would be capable of demanding, in the words of another of Kosambi's favourite poets, Blake:

Bring me my bow of burning gold! Bring me my arrows of desire! Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold! Bring me my chariots of fire! This is the best of all possible warfare, the only one for a poet Kosambi wrote. In retrospect, one feels that one can say this about a scientist- social scientist too, if one can get to the heart of Kosambi's warfare on

#### References :

1. Dale Reipe, D.D. Kosambi: Father of Scientific Indian History in R.S Sharma and V. Jha, eds, Indian Society: Historical Probing: In Memory of D.D. Kosambi (Peoples Publishing House, Delhi, 1974), pp. 34-44
2. Romila Thapar has used this expression in her The Contribution of D.D. Kosambi to Indology, included in her Interpreting Early India (Oxford India paperbacks, Delhi, second impression, 1994), pp. 89-113 [hereafter The Contribution of D.D. Kosambi.
3. Tomy knowledge, Romila Thapar's 'The Contribution of D.D. Kosambi' remains the only analytical overview of his writings so far. Forareview of Kosambi's Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1965) see D.N. Jha, A Marxist view of Ancient Indian History, in his Economy and Society in Early India: Issues and Paradigms (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1993), chap. 2. See also idem, D.D. Kosambi in S.P. Sen, ed. Historians and Historiography in Modern India (Calcutta, 1973), pp. 121-32.
4. It seems that this is what Kosambi was being accused of towards the end of his career as Professor of Mathematics at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai. See the reminiscences section in Science and Human Progress: Essays in Honour of Late Professor
5. D.D. Kosambi (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1974), p. 16, 5. D.D. Kosambi, Adventure into the unknown™, in K. Satchidananda Murty and Ramakrishna Rao, eds, Current Trends in Indian Philosophy (Asia Publishing House, Waltair, 1972), pp. 158-9.
6. This information has been gathered from a careful reading of reminiscences about him in Science and Human Progress and from his Marathi biography by Chintamani Deshmukh, Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi (Jivan ani Karya), (Mumbai, 1993).
7. Science and Human Progress, p. 319.
8. Acknowledgments in J.L. Masson and DD. Kosambi, tr. Avimaraka: Love's Enchanted World (Motilal Banarsidass Delhi-Patna-Varanasi, 1970).
9. Science and Human Progress, p. 319.
10. (a) Sataktrayam of Bhartrhari (The Southern Archetype of the three centuries of Epigrams Ascribed to Bhartrhari), for the first time edited by D.D. Kosambi, with an anonymous Sanskrit commentary edited by Pt. K.V. Krishnamoorthy Sharma (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1946) (hereafter Bhartrhari, 1946); (b) Bhartrhari-viracita-sataka-tray-adi-subhasita-samgrahah (The Epigrams attributed to Bhartrhari, including the three centuries for the first time collected and critically edited with principal variations and an Introduction) by D.D. Kosambi with a

- Foreword by Acharya Muni Jina Vijaya (Singhi Jain Series, no. 23, Bombay 1948) (hereafter Bhartrhari, 1948).
11. Chintamani Deshmukh, pp. 34-5.
  12. An essential reading for understanding what Kosambi was trying to achieve through his fieldworks is Pilgrim's Progress: A contribution to the Prehistory of the Western Deccan Plateau, in his Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962), chap. 4
  13. In addition to Bhartrhari 1946 and Bhartrhari 1948, Kosambi was associated with the following other publications on Bhartrhari: (a) The Satakhatrayam of Bhartrhari with the Commentary of Ramarsi, edited in collaboration with Pt. K.V. Krishnamaoorthy Sharma (Anandasrama Sanskrit Series, no. 127, Poona 1945), (b) Sri Bhartrhari-Yogindra- Viracita-Subhasitatisati, revised with the help of D.D. Kosambi and others (Nimaya Sagar Press, Bombay, 1957)
  14. The Subliasaratnakosa compiled by Vidyakara, edited by D.D. Kosambi and V.V. Gokhale, with an Introduction by D.D. Kosambi (Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 42), (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957).
  15. Daniel H.H. Ingalls, "My friendship with D.D. Kosambi" in R.S. Sharma and V. Jha, eds. Indian Society: Historical Probing, p. 26.
  16. Kosambi's admiration for quality extended beyond narrowly defined academic world, Referring to the works of Sunil Janah, some of whose photographs of tribal life he chose for inclusion in his Culture and Civilization, he wrote in a letter: "I have every hope of getting a few magnificent shots from Sunil Janah, a real artist with the camera, who has a superb collection of tribal photos. Incidentally, if you know anyone in Germany who wants to publish photos of Indian tribal people as a book by itself, Janah is the man to contact. Letter dated November, 1963 to GD. Sontheimer of Heidelberg University. I am grateful to the memory of late Professor Sontheimer who had allowed me to photocopy and use the letters written to him by Professor Kosambi.
  17. First published by Popular Book Depot (now Popular Prakashan), (Bombay, 1956). 18, (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962).