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# Decolonising the Past

## Historical Writing in the Time of Sachin – and Beyond

*The decades of the 1950s and 1960s were a watershed in the writing of history. Narratives of the past continued to be written as they are to this day, and there continues to be a valuable gathering of new evidence. But the more challenging trend has been to pursue answers to questions that relate to why and how something happened rather than merely when and where. Actions and events had multiple causes and the priorities among these have to be justified by the evidence as well as by logical argument. There is also a need to integrate a variety of facets in constructing a historical context. History was an explanation of what happened in the past, an attempt to understand the past, and of basing this understanding on 'critical enquiry', incorporated into what is also called the 'historical method'. Historical understanding also has to be viewed as a 'process in time'.*

**ROMILA THAPAR**

I must confess that I feel diffident about giving a memorial lecture for Sachin Chaudhuri because at the back of my mind I keep hearing his deep-throated laugh and his voice, saying, "So, you are giving a lecture in my memory – let's see what you have to say". What I have to say is to try and recall the early 1960s, in Delhi, a recollection in which I remember him as something of an intellectual pivot. The conversations and concerns of those who knew him, were imaging extraordinary times, full of intellectual exuberance, especially in what came to be the social sciences or the human sciences as some of us prefer to call them. Looking back, I would like to compare this to a conjunction of constellations, the point at which in ancient astronomical reckoning one 'yuga' or cycle ended and another began through a realigning of the constellations. The disciplines within the human sciences, began conversing with each other, moving towards new definitions. And somehow Sachin was unobtrusively central to many such conversations.

Reflection does not come easily to me, yet let me try. I did not really know Sachin in Bombay. As a student in the 1950s I was only briefly in and out of Bombay. I knew of him of course as he was a close friend of my brother, Romesh and his wife Raj and they often spoke of him. I got to know him personally when Romesh moved to Delhi in 1961 and Sachin would frequently stay with them when he visited Delhi. Romesh was editing *Seminar*, but wrote a regular column for *The Economic Weekly*. Their friendship encapsulated the commitment of two editors introducing two new kinds of journals to the reading public. *The Economic Weekly*, although broadly concerned with economic matters included much else from other disciplines, whereas *Seminar* focused on a single theme each month and brought together diverse views. Both carried thoughtful analyses with, if need be, a questioning of existing wisdom, written and read by those who were seriously concerned about the world around them. Both journals were brought out on a shoe-string budget with none of the hoopla that accompanies such

publications today. It may have been symbolic that both men had their birthdays on January 1, though on different years.

It was not easy to bring out such journals. People had to be persuaded to write: some were indolent and could not meet deadlines, others were hesitant about giving their thoughts a written, public form. But Sachin was persuasive, his mind reached out to a range of human activity and he could connect ideas in a dynamic way, posing the necessary questions to stimulate a variety of answers. He sought not only the established names but also the post-independence generation of young intellectuals. Growth economics and the debate on a planned economy were major issues as were concerns about democratic functioning. Discussions on these were central to Sachin's view of the implications of development. The initiative was begun in Bombay University in the 1950s and was reflected in *The Economic Weekly*, as also were the views of economists at Cambridge who were Sachin's personal friends, among them Joan Robinson, Richard Goodwin and Maurice Dobb. In the 1960s some of this activity shifted to Delhi University, which is where I first met it.

Therefore, it was a matter of great distress when *The Economic Weekly*, widely read in the 1950s and early 1960s, had to be closed down because of financial problems. It was then decided to collect contributions towards publishing what was to be called the *Economic and Political Weekly*. The title reflected a broader scope recognising the interrelationship between economics, politics and various other disciplines.

*EPW* came to host discussions on emergent disciplines in the social sciences. Like its predecessor, *EPW* too was a forum for economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, demography and history, with a much needed focus on Indian problems and peculiarities. Gradually the interface between these disciplines in the late 1950s and early 1960s became part of the evolving social sciences. History as a social science developed a new orientation different from its earlier inclusion in Indology. The colonial construction of what was called Indology referred

literally to all aspects of studies on India. But there was an emphasis on history, languages, religion, art and archaeology and anything that came to be associated with 'culture'.

As a consequence of history moving towards the social sciences two parallel approaches emerged in historical research. One was the growing recognition that the past had to be explained, understood, reinterpreted on the basis of what was being called 'critical enquiry', and that such explanations could also help us understand the present in more focused ways than before. The other approach was reluctant to include critical enquiry into investigating the past. In this second approach earlier theories were reincarnated in order to justify the preconceptions of some ideologies of the present, which drew on a continuation of colonial notions about the Indian past.

I would like to dwell at greater length on the first of these approaches, the critique of the second being implicit. The attempt to understand the past through new methods of analyses resulted in a paradigm shift in the historical writing on early India. I have limited the theme to early history since I have some familiarity with it. But I also want to highlight another interest that Sachin had and which is often overlooked – his search for the subtleties in defining 'Indian culture'. I recall many sunny, winter afternoons in the garden in Delhi, when we chatted about 'culture' as patterns of living, and particularly those going back to the past.

## Two Approaches to India's Past

Fifty years ago, at the time of independence, we had inherited a history of the subcontinent which incorporated two substantial views of the past: the colonial and the nationalist. Both claimed to be based on contemporary techniques of historical research. The claim was reasonably correct to the extent that they were primarily concerned with chronology and sequential narratives about ruling powers. The initial colonial view going back to the early 19th century was a departure from any earlier Indian historical traditions and drew on European preconceptions of Indian history.

It had three foundational arguments. The first was the periodisation of Indian history, a periodisation that was to have consequences not only for the writing of history but a major political fallout effect in the 20th century. Indian history was divided into the Hindu and the Muslim civilisation and the British period, formulated by James Mill in *The History of British India* written in the early 19th century. These labels were taken from the religions of the ruling dynasties – Hindu and Muslim. The divisions were endorsed by the assumption that the units of Indian society were mutually hostile, monolithic and uniform religious communities, primarily the Hindu and the Muslim. The Hindus came to be called the majority community, and the Muslims and others, were the minority communities, on the basis of their numbers in the census returns. This periodisation projected an obsession with an absence of historical change in India and further, it presumed that religion superseded all other authority. That we still cling to it or to its shadow almost two hundred years later indicates our willingness to deny historical change in our past.

The second assertion was that the precolonial political economy conformed to the model of Oriental Despotism, which assumed a static society characterised by an absence of private property in land, despotic and oppressive rulers and therefore endemic poverty. This pattern did not envisage any marked economic change and was characteristic of backward societies.

The third aspect was the argument that society was divided into castes – the four varnas – and these formed a frozen social

structure, again unchanging through history. Those that had some admiration for the Indian past, such as Max Mueller and a few other Orientalists, derived it largely from what they saw as the Aryan imprint on Indian civilisation both as a race and a language, and caste was said to be rooted in these foundations. The dominant language of the civilisation was Sanskrit and the paramount religion was Vedic Brahmanism. This was seen as characteristic of Aryan culture and there was a concern to identify and segregate the Aryan from the non-Aryan. Aryan was seen as superior in part because of a supposed link with Europe.

These preconceptions governed routine history focusing on chronology and the narrative of dynasties. Indian historians, by and large continued this routine. Nevertheless, there was also some concern especially among historians influenced by nationalist ideas about certain of these preconceptions. Most accepted the colonial periodisation. Others changed the nomenclature to ancient, medieval and modern, borrowed from Europe and thought to be more secular, although the markers remained the same. Thus, there was no effective change in periodisation.

The theory of Oriental Despotism was rejected. Curiously however, there was little interest in providing carefully thought-out alternative hypotheses on the Indian political economy and society. Social history in standard works largely reiterated the description of the four varnas, registering little recognition of deviations, leave alone explaining them. Although there were exceptions pointing to other ways, these exceptions were not at the forefront.

Parallel to the above – what has been described as mainstream, secular nationalism – were the two religious nationalisms, Hindu and Muslim. These were systematised into ideologies of political mobilisation in the early 20th century. For them the interest was less in researching alternate paradigms and more in seeking to use history to legitimise current political ideology and mobilisation. An example of this was the insistence that a religious identity was the seminal identity in the past and continued to be so in the present. This was a justification for separate nation states in contemporary times. These historical views were based on the colonial interpretations of Indian history which were reincarnated, as it were, to serve the political intentions of the present.

The past is inevitably part of the present. But the relationship between the two, which includes continuities and disjunctures, becomes more meaningful if the past can be explained and understood, with all its features both agreeable and disagreeable, rather than being used arbitrarily to validate the agendas of the present.

## Re-examining History: Early Trends

The need to examine history in terms of a different set of parameters was at this point a somewhat premature thought among mainstream historians. However, such parameters were being suggested by other writing. The prehistory of the social sciences as it were, had begun in discussions around the nature of Indian society and the cause of economic poverty. Dadabhai Naoroji had maintained that the colonial economy drained the wealth of India and was the source of Indian poverty. Analysing the colonial economy was the first step for those who either supported or contested this theory. Rajni Palme Dutt's indictment of colonial policy made a substantial contribution to the debate.

The teasing out of the strands of the caste structure and its social implications was evident in the writings of D P Mukherjee and N K Bose who were unfreezing the theoretical pattern. By describing the ground reality of caste and underlining what differentiated it from the norms set out in the dharma-shastras,

new research on caste was initiated. The point was not easily taken by most historians. The normative view was implicit to the then vision of Indian civilisation where caste tied to the conventional reading of religion was seen as the enduring feature. B R Ambedkar's writings on the history of the shudras and dalits were not cited in studies of social history, nevertheless they had an indirect impact. Caste was not merely a social hierarchy but was inherently linked to issues of domination and subordination. The interlinking of higher and lower through intermediate categories in the hierarchy prevented a confrontation between the dominant and the subordinated.

Among the more influential colonial representations of the world at that time was its division into discrete civilisations. Each was demarcated territorially and associated with a single language and religion. The implicit counterpart to the civilised was the presence of the non-civilised, the lesser breeds without the law. The implications of this superiority had not been questioned at the time. (I might add as an aside, that even now, although questioned by many, nevertheless Arnold Toynbee's 26 civilisations have merely been overlaid by Samuel Huntington's eight.) Colonial perception identified caste Hindus as the civilised and the others less so and labelled some of the latter as primitive, a label that persists at the popular level.

Cultural nationalism came to be formulated from colonial notions of civilisation, much discussed by the Indian middle-class. Few attempted to ascertain precolonial definitions of culture with its multiple variations. It was easier to stay with the colonial reading. The powerful intellectual controversies of earlier times, authored by brahmanas and non-brahmanas, tended to be projected as religious sectarian discourses by both colonial and nationalist interpreters. That these earlier discussions had drawn on dialectics incorporating rational and logical reasoning and had recorded dissent, was hardly conceded and rarely explored. There was a preference for viewing them as minor disagreements within a centrally agreed philosophy. Early scientific knowledge was described but its social implications were seldom part of a historical discourse. Given the separation between history and philosophy as disciplines it was not thought necessary to locate ideas in a historical background. Cultural nationalism was confined to contours dictated by colonial preconceptions. The current claims to authentic, indigenous identities, unchanging and eternal, pose immense problems to historians. Identities are neither timeless and unchanging, nor homogeneous, nor singular as maintained in the 19th century notion of civilisation. Even concepts of cultural nationalism have to be located in the historical circumstances that fashion them.

The questioning of existing theories about the past gradually altered the criteria of analyses among historians and the asking of new questions also widened the range of sources. This led to some distancing from both the colonial and the nationalist interpretations of Indian history. Since knowledge is not chronos-free, it has to be related to a specific situation and time. This is all the more so where a shift in paradigm is involved, where the frame of reference is being realigned. In part this shift had to do with questions related to the broader issues concerning the Indian nation state in the 1950s. This was not an attempt at imposing the present on the past, but at trying to understand the present by more insightful explanations of the past.

Emerging from a colonial situation, the initial question was how the new nation was to be shaped. This required understanding the components of the nation and the form they had taken in the past. A better understanding of this provided a prelude to current concerns. These included discussions on economic

growth, the establishing of a greater degree of social equality and comprehending the potential of a variegated cultural heritage. These were issues that were being discussed in *The Economic Weekly* and the discussions were to continue in the *EPW*. Inevitably this also led to questioning the view of history that had been constructed in the last two hundred years, apart from obtaining information about aspects of the past that had not been researched earlier. The questions were not limited to politics and the economy but extended to social forms, cultural and religious expression and the formulation of identities and traditions. Historiography, the history and philosophy of historical writing and seeing the historian as part of a historical process began to surface in historical writing. This was to become a significant aspect of historical exploration. Earlier historical writing came to be re-assessed in the light of new kinds of evidence and of theories explaining the past.

In the questioning of existing explanations the validity of periodising history as Hindu, Muslim and British was increasingly doubted. It posited two thousand years of a golden age for the first, eight hundred years of despotic tyranny for the second, and a supposed modernisation under the British. Such divisions set aside the relevance of significant changes within these periods. That any such age can be described as consistently glorious or tyrannical was questioned as also the characterisation of an age merely by the behaviour of rulers or by their religion. The doubt was encouraged when history became more than just the study of dynasties, and also from the realisation that communities and religions are not monolithic, but are segmented and segments had their own varying relationships with each other.

### Dialogue with Other Disciplines

Alternate notions of periodisation were in part a reaction to the opening up of a dialogue between history and other disciplines, in ways that were different from earlier attempts at introducing diverse facets of the past. Conventional history juxtaposed the succession of dynasties – one more glorious than the next – with economic history, social history and the history of religion and the arts. These were all included within the same chronological brackets but were segregated. However, by relating them more closely to each other and to a historical context they formed a network of interconnected features and gave greater depth to historical argument. The interface between the past and the present encouraged the notion of exploring some themes even in other disciplines through looking at their historical past. Some familiarity with earlier historical experience could provide insights into contemporary phenomena. This also introduced the idea of comparative history. The intention was not to apply the patterns of other societies to India but to use the information in a comparative manner to ask further questions of one's own society.

I would like to consider some examples of the kind of history that emerged from these dialogues. Discussion on these went through two phases. Initially history was opened up to interdisciplinary perspectives and to new analytical methods in the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently extensive explanations of the past followed. Some were based on hitherto unknown evidence but more generally they arose from new enquiries. To pinpoint the precise time when these interpretations came to be established is difficult since it is an ongoing process. I shall therefore also be touching on more recent work that has followed the initial paradigm shift, referring where possible to the earlier and later phases.

The concept of the nation had run into confusion with the two-nation theory. The clarification did not lie in taking it back to

earlier times but in differentiating between nation and state, with the state being the primary entity in early times. The state had earlier been associated with a patriarchal society whereas in the theories of state-formation in the 1960s various other features were given priority, ranging from environment to the nature of political control. A centrally administered kingdom had been assumed to be the basis of all states in the past. The break-up of large kingdoms into smaller ones was equated with political decline and read as a fragmentation of a polity accompanied by an absence of consolidated power. But this was not invariably so.

The likelihood of variation in patterns of power gradually led to the demarcation between forms of political organisation. Clan-based societies with chiefs, generally agro-pastoral, are thought by some historians as being prior to the existence of a state, although not all would agree. Kingdoms demonstrated greater complexity reflecting more clearly the emergence of the state. The change has been seen as seminal to the societies described in the Vedas, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and the early Buddhist canon. These studies will hopefully shift the obsessive discussion on the origin and identity of 'the Aryans' and the Aryan foundations of Indian civilisation to broader questions such as those being currently considered on the nature of social change, on the interface between multiple cultures, and on mechanisms of legitimising power; all questions germane to enquiries into the early Indian past. Historical analyses are of course complicated by the fact that these variant forms have coexisted as they still do and their complexities are reflected in historical sources.

When the structure of the state began to be discussed it led to a focus on the typology of state systems. How a state comes into existence at different times has now become a focused study in which the state is not something distinct from society. The nature of the formation of states suggested variables that were different from earlier to later times. The Mauryan state was not identical with that of the Guptas. The discussion on varied forms had implications for the definition of empire as well, as is evident in the study of imperial administrations. Thus it can be asked whether the Mauryan empire was a highly centralised bureaucratic system as most of us had argued in our earlier writing or can it be seen as a more diversified system as some of us began arguing in our later writings. The tension between control from the centre and assertion of local autonomy has been a recurring feature and is now being commented upon. The regular use of the term 'empire' for all kingdoms has come in for questioning with kingdom being differentiated from empire. Religion was an unlikely primary factor in the initial emergence of the state which required more utilitarian resources. But in the welding of segments into empire, as in the policies of Ashoka and Akbar, there was recourse to certain facets of religion.

In the colonial view the village was the economic unit of Indian society and towns received less attention. The trend towards what were to become urban centres of the historical period in the Ganga plain dates to about the sixth century BC. The presence of towns becomes gradually more marked in subsequent centuries. Cities were linked to state systems, not just as capitals but also as centres for the exchange of goods. The recognition of urban sites on the ground also led to broader definitions of urbanisation. As a process it was investigated in terms of the environment and resources of its location, its demography and its potential as a centre for exchange. This was partially influenced by the focused research on Harappan cities both in tracing their emergence as urban centres and the causes of their decline.

The ideological confrontation between the 'gana-sanghas' – the oligarchies or chiefdoms, and the 'rajyas' – kingdoms, earlier

referred to in passing, is now eliciting greater interest. The texts present divergent views on social ethics, as for example, on 'ahimsa'/non-violence, in the Pali Buddhist canon and the Bhagavad Gita. Arguments and counter-arguments among the intellectuals of those times were an intrinsic part of the urban experience. Earlier studies noted that orthodox views were challenged by the heterodox, whom the brahmanas referred to as the 'nastika' and the 'pashanda'; and the latter used similar terms for the former. Relating these ideas to a historical context had only a small beginning in historical studies, the trend being to treat them non-historically.

Exchange in varying forms, from barter to commerce, for which there is a spurt of evidence from the post-Mauryan period provided an additional economic dimension. Numismatics or the study of coins was not limited to honing the chronology of rulers but introduced the preliminaries of money and markets at exchange centres. Closeness to other parts of Asia was known through overland routes. Maritime connections have now come to the forefront, underlining further cultural and intellectual cross-currents. The dialogue between Indian astronomers and those of Alexandria in the early centuries AD, was but one aspect of this. More recently evidence of what seems to have been bilingualism in Greek and Prakrit and probably, Sanskrit, suggests a need to re-examine the cross-currents in the many cultures of the north-western areas. The role of commerce in a range of Asian economies was once limited to the listing of archaeological and textual evidence. Now the questions relate to the complexities of commercial arrangements. The orbit ran from Tunis to Canton in the period prior to European expansion. Half-serious comments are being made on globalisation before globalisation. Serious observation questions the validity of discrete, self-sufficient civilisations.

### Theories of Explaining the Past

In the 1960s and in many parts of the world, historical research had become an attempt to explain the past. Consequently theories of explanation came in for intense discussion. These incorporated commentaries on the writing of Karl Marx, Max Weber, the French sociologists and historians of the Annales School, and more recently on Michel Foucault. The 'Otherness' of India, sometimes projected as the absence of features leading up to capitalism, can be seen for example, in Karl Marx's construction of the Asiatic Mode of Production and in Max Weber's projection of the religion of India. Their explanations were not always applicable to Indian history in a literal sense, nevertheless, even in rejecting these, questions were raised that led to exploring new themes, as did their methods of analyses.

Explanations of Indian society were debated, particularly those drawing on Marxist thought. The explanations were not definitive and permanent although the fervour of the discussion suggested that they might be so. They introduced the historian to aspects of the past that had earlier seemed closed and brought the peripheral into the mainstream in a meaningful way.

The centrality of social and economic history was evident in all these theories. Methods of analysis influenced by historical materialism were adapted by some but with the caveat that the Indian data might suggest variant patterns. The work of D D Kosambi was a paradigm shift and whether or not one agrees with his generalisations, his writings were impressively wide-ranging and catalytic. He was able, authoritatively, to open to wide scholarly discussion what was often regarded as the closed preserve of Indologists.

Marxist historical writing introduced the idea of modes of production which further altered periodisation. Marx's notion of an Asiatic Mode of Production was set aside. However, the possibility of a feudal mode of production and the debate on the transition to capitalism captured historical interest. The notion of feudalism had initially drawn on European parallels but now the discussion was of the more extensive Marxist model. Significantly, the critiquing of the feudal mode for India was also initiated by Marxist historians and when joined by others became an even more vigorous debate.

The argument was based on changes in land relations in the latter half of the first millennium AD. The transition to feudalism lay in the system of granting land or villages, primarily to brahmanas, to temples, to Buddhist monasteries and to a few who had served the state. Since the granting of land became a focal point of the political economy, it brought about a tangible change in agrarian relations. This change played a significant role particularly after about the eighth-ninth centuries AD. The discussion for and against the feudal mode opened up new perceptions about the state, the economy and society, religious activities and other potential areas of investigation, as well as other theories of explanation.

Grants of land to religious beneficiaries led predictably to innovations in their activities and beliefs. They established institutions and became powerful property holders. Inscriptions recording these grants are a telling example of how a historical record is used only minimally until a new set of questions are asked. The inscriptions had been read since the 19th century but largely for data on chronology and on dynasties. Only in the last 50 years did they begin to be examined in-depth for data on agrarian relations and for assessing elite patronage to religious groups.

Some religious cults became a network of support for particular dynasties, a process that was more visible at the local level. The yadavas for instance, were both devotees and patrons of the emerging cult of Vitthala, and the geographical distribution of the cult could also be seen as the area of support for the patron. Religious institutions such as the 'vihara' and the 'matha', have been studied as agencies of intervention, often in association with the ruling powers, quite apart from their fostering formal religions.

Sifting the activities covered by the all-inclusive label of 'religion', and attempting to unravel their social functions helps to clarify the links between social roles and religious beliefs. At the same time popular religious movements, some known to contradict or deviate from the orthodox, occupied a prominent place on the historical canvas. The contours of popular religions – the Bhakti and Shakta sects in particular and later the gurus and pirs – are being mapped through finding out who their followers were and their patrons, as well as through the manner in which they either distanced themselves from or accommodated conventional religious teachings. Such intersections are of historical interest, particularly in the current ambience when political groups are muscling in and claiming to be defending this or that religion. The interaction between religious sects and social groups are often lost in the rigidities of formal religion. The relationship between the worshipper and his deity in the bhakti tradition has been compared to that of the peasant and his feudal lord. This remains a continuing argument but the discussion it has provoked enables us to know more about the intricacies of both relationships.

Anthropological studies used in a comparative manner have pointed to further directions in social history. Thus the analysis of kinship connections is helping to trace diverse genealogical patterns in the lengthy ancestral lists of the Kurus and the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. The earlier presumed uniformity

is being replaced by seeing these lists as incorporating varied social groups. Ritual is inherently an act of worship but when encrusted with social meaning it could also become a way of legitimising power and status. The discrepancies between statements in narrative sources and the regulations of the dharma-shastras, pointed up the fact that the latter were indeed normative texts and did not necessarily describe actual society as had been assumed earlier. Nor were claims to opulence and grandeur to be taken literally without other supporting evidence. The point was brought home more visibly through excavations of simple mud and mud-brick structures at places believed to be those mentioned in the Mahabharata. Epic poetry is more often the capturing of an illusion rather than the mirroring of reality.

The supposedly immobile character of caste gave way to realising that there were degrees of caste mobility. The sociological theory of sanskritisation – that lower castes sometimes sought upward mobility by imitating the mores of upper castes – was applied to certain historical situations but it had its limitations. It was more appropriate to assertions of status among the brahmanas and kshatriyas who were sometimes recruited from lesser castes. Ritual specialists of various kinds could end up as temple priests when cult shrines evolved into temples. Politics was an open arena and claims to kshatriya identities are among the more ambiguous. The process was not always one of osmosis. Imitating lifestyles can be the cause of some friction if not confrontation.

These re-orientations in the study of early Indian history were anticipated as a consequence of interdisciplinary trends, of theories of explanation and of methodological change. The later themes emerged from these discussions although some also touch contemporary concerns.

For instance, gender studies have not been just the accumulation of more data on the history of women but garnering the views and activities of women and observing how these conditioned society. Particular social forms became patterns of control over women, and resistance to these is significant to social history. Earlier, popular belief held that Gargi asking philosophical questions, or the official recording of the donations of Ashoka's queen, Karuvaki, were proof of women generally being held in respect. But when such references were placed alongside the evidence of a subordinate status, the assessment required re-consideration. Historically women were as central to the creation of communities and identities as were men.

The mutation implied in the phrase, from jana to jati, from clan to caste, suggested new modalities in the history of social change. For example, it was perhaps possible to trace the origins of certain jatis to non-caste groups such as forest dwellers. The 'chief' families aspired to become kshatriyas and other clansmen were relegated to being shudra peasants and providing labour. A vignette of this process is given in the *Harshacharita* of Banabhatta, a seventh century biography of the king Harsha. The mutation required an alteration in the immediate economy, often converting forest into fields, and an acceptance by an erstwhile relatively more egalitarian society of the hierarchies essential to caste.

Descriptions of the nishada, bhil and shabara overlap at times with those of the rakshasas/demons. One wonders whether the rakshasas were figures of fantasy as was thought earlier, or whether some at least represent a demonising of the culturally alien as is being thought now. The initial systematic study of collecting references to the chandala needs now to be related to delineating alternate social forms, to whatever degree the references allow. Seeing the change as a historical process involves

the need to integrate the contribution of such groups to the making of Indian history, a contribution still waiting for recognition.

### Shifts in Understanding

Subba Rao's work in the late 1950s suggested connections between geographical regions, the environment and historical perspectives. These were causal factors in history and sometimes became problematic. Awareness of the environment reflected on historical causation. The range included the silting up of deltas as observed by ancient Greek navigators requiring the relocation of ports; changing river courses leading to migrations and shifting settlements, as happened with the late Harappan settlements on the Hakra river; or deforestation changing the landscape, the economy, and much more.

The interest in regional history grew by degrees, assisted to some extent by the creation of linguistic states from the 1950s superseding the more arbitrary boundaries of the erstwhile provinces. The new states were treated as sub-national territorial units. Texts in the regional languages provide abundant information, some from early periods as in south India and more generally with a marked increase after about AD 1000. The standpoint of subcontinental history, conventionally viewed from the Ganga plain, has had to change with the emergence of regional perspectives. For example, when kingdoms were no longer seen invariably as centralised bureaucratic systems then the region as part of larger polities had a more defined role.

Regional histories form patterns that sometimes vary and the variations have a historical base. For example, the model of the four varnas was not the caste pattern in the entire subcontinent as was maintained earlier. Why did brahmanas and vellala peasants give shape to the history of Tamil Nadu whereas khatri traders dominated the Punjab? Differences are not just diversities in regional styles. They are expressions of multiple cultural norms that cut across monolithic, uniform identities. This requires a reconsideration of what constitutes the identities that have come to us from the past.

This also requires the historian to juxtapose a diversity of sources from artifacts to texts. It was thought that whereas artifacts, being material and tangible, can be examined from multiple perspectives, this was not possible with texts. But gradually texts are also being examined from various perspectives. Indological studies, and especially philology, were extensive investigations into the structure of the languages which also helped to date the texts. These studies are now being further facilitated by computer analyses of the literary styles of a text, the constructing of concordances of words/signs, and locating the occurrences of words, although such studies are sporadic. Individual words have a history and their meaning may change in a changed historical context. The word *pashanda*, initially used in the sense of any doctrine, was in later centuries, used for heresy.

However, a different kind of investigation of placing the text in its context has widened the possible range of meanings and intentions. We know that texts cannot be taken literally. Their authors, audiences and agendas have to be scrutinised. Thus intention and agency become significant and have to be differentiated for each text. For example, inscriptions are often the official version issued by the ruler. They have to be distinguished from narratives claiming historicity, the 'vamshavalis', of which the *Rajatarangini* – the history of Kashmir, written in the 12th century by Kalhana is the finest example. These again are different from the 'charitas' – the biographies of rulers, such as, the *Ramacharitam* of Sandhyakara Nandin, a biography of the

Pala king Ramapala. Where court poets pursued literary style at the expense of veracity, rhetoric has to be separated from fact.

The texts that have survived from the early period are generally those of elite groups. There are hardly any written sources from those marginalised by mainstream society – women, dalits, forest dwellers, lower castes. This realisation has led to a re-reading of texts in search of even oblique references to the perspectives of such groups. In earlier historical studies creative literature was used largely only as a source of information. In recent times literary texts are beginning to be used as articulations of time, place and people, visualising a glimpse of a historical moment. Resort to the more influential 'literary turn' as it has been called, is apparent in some of the writing of the subaltern historians, but this is restricted so far to analyses of modern times.

The decades of the 1950s and 60s therefore were a watershed in the writing of history. Narratives of the past continued to be written as they are to this day, and there continues to be a valuable gathering of new evidence. But the more challenging trend has been to pursue answers to questions that relate to why and how something happened rather than merely when and where. Actions and events had multiple causes and the priorities among these have to be justified by the evidence as well as logical argument. There is also the need to integrate a variety of facets in constructing a historical context – the nature of the state and the economy; the pattern of caste and gender relationships; religious sects, icons, monuments and institutions as forms of social expression; the impact of the environment; and many more still awaiting exploration. History was an explanation of what happened in the past, an attempt to understand the past, and of basing this understanding on what was recognised as the necessary critical enquiry, incorporated into what is also called the historical method. The understanding is not confined to just a moment in time, to a particular context, since it has also to be viewed as a process in time.

### History Today

This was not something that we were taught as students, but it is an essential part of what we teach our students today. It is a training that begins with a careful assessment of the reliability of the evidence and an insistence that all possible evidence pertaining to a subject be used. The analysis of the evidence revolves around issues of causality and objectivity and centres the argument on logic. An initial hypothesis is tested at various stages as the research proceeds. Where necessary it is modified or changed. The generalisation that emerges is an explanation of the theme being researched and hopefully provides an understanding of a segment of the past. Even where the explanation requires a small leap of the imagination, the leap takes off from critical enquiry. This is the historian's contribution to knowledge but it is also an essential process in human sciences. And in making this contribution the historian is aware that other evidence may surface, fresh generalisations may emerge and knowledge be further advanced. But claim to an advance receives consideration only if it fulfils the requirements of the historical method.

My attempt at an overview of the directions taken by recent interpretations of early Indian history would be incomplete if I did not comment on the recent controversy over historical writing. The comment is necessary because an attempt is being made mainly through the propagation of what some are now calling the Hindutva view of history, to dismantle the history and the historical method that I have been discussing. It uses history as the bedrock of legitimising a particular identity and a particular self-perception projected as nationalism. In the claim to propagating

an indigenous view of history it effectively endorses the 19th century colonial frames of interpreting Indian history – in fact precisely the kind of history that has now been critiqued and sloughed off.

It insists, for example, on exclusive 'Aryan' foundations of Indian civilisation. This is taken back to the Harappa culture by stating that the creators of the Indus cities were 'Aryans'. It is taken forward by asserting that Hindus are Aryans and the ancient period was the age of Hindu glory brought to an abrupt end by Muslim invasions. The medieval period is characterised by continuous Muslim conquests with their counterpart of continuous Hindu resistance. Colonial preconceptions are re-incarnated in this view through returning to the periodisation of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British; through the theory of Oriental Despotism which is sought to be applied to governance in the Muslim period; and through the assertion that Indian society throughout the Hindu period conformed to the ideals of caste society as laid out in the 'varnashramadharma' and therefore did not need to change. There is a refusal to concede social and economic change, nor the interface between many cultures with varied relationships, nor the pluralities of Hindu, Muslim and other societies.

Obviously there is an element of ideology – conscious or subconscious – in the exploration of knowledge, but this is not the same as the induction of arbitrary preconceptions into knowledge: and the more so if they are intended for political mobilisation and sectarian ambitions. A differentiation has to be made between a history based on the critical enquiry that governs historical method, and a history put together from preferred preconceptions.

If the history of the subcontinent is to be written as a sensitive and thoughtful understanding of the past, the analyses have to draw on critical enquiry. Should this be abandoned, then that which is labelled as 'history' becomes a free-for-all, accompanied by public abuse and physical force (as we witnessed in recent years), in order to silence those that still respect the procedures inherent in advancing knowledge. Such silence is not just a censoring of history but a censoring of knowledge. These assaults will continue to be possible until critical enquiry is given the centrality that it should have in our academic and intellectual discourse.

And this takes me back to Sachin who would have been immensely curious about some of the interconnections that I have referred to, as also stimulated by the potentialities that they suggest – as indeed are those of us who are involved in these explorations. He would also have been enraged by the attempts to censor knowledge. I would like to conclude with his words in his last editorial:

Concessions to unreason and illegitimate demands however powerfully engineered by sectional interests are a dire threat to the very existence of the nation and to civilised government. The spectre of naked reaction and triumphant unreason must be fought to the finish. **[EW]**

[This is an expanded version of the first Sachin Chaudhuri Memorial Lecture, organised by the Sameeksha Trust, that was delivered by the author on March 15, 2005 in Mumbai. Amit Bhaduri and Neeladri Bhattacharya commented on an earlier draft of this lecture and their comments, much appreciated, have helped clarify some of what this article tries to say.]

## MADRAS SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

(Behind Govt. Data Centre), Gandhi Mandapam Road, Chennai 600 025

Applications have been invited by Anna University for M.Sc. Economics Degree Programme for the Academic Year 2005-2006. The 2-year (4 Semester) Programme is offered by **ANNA UNIVERSITY** in collaboration with Madras School of Economics (MSE), Chennai 600 025. Students will have to undergo course work in economic theory and quantitative techniques and in atleast one of the following areas of specialisation –

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**Application Procedure: In person:** Application form for Entrance Examination and Admission can be had in person from 21.03.2005 from the Director (Admissions), Examination Centre, Anna University, Chennai 600 025 on payment by DD (dated not earlier than 20.03.2005) in favour of the Director (Admissions), Anna University, Chennai 600 025. The cost of application form and Entrance Examination fee is Rs. 600/- for General category and Rs. 300/- for SC/ST candidates.

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Complete details are available in the instructions to candidates attached with the application form.

DIRECTOR