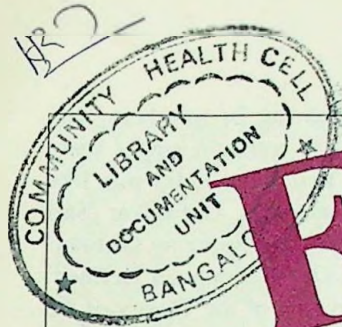




FACTS

against MYTHS

VIKAS ADHYAYAN KENDRA

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Appropriating The Past :

Myths of Ancient History – Part 1

by P.R. Ram

Comment

The events of last two decades have brought to the forefront the painful reality that communal forces can misuse history to unimaginable limits; as a tool to manipulate mass consciousness. This in turn serves as the basis on which 'consent' is manufactured to 'engineer communal violence'. Consequently, this leads to the increasing communalisation of society, for which again a distorted, mythified version of history is the major 'handle' for instance to beat minorities with. At one level it is ancient history which is 'constructed' -- to involve a communal identity at the deepest level.

In these times when the communalisation project of Hindu Right is on the ascendant, "...our past is projected to be crucial for our present and our future. History, the image of the past, is being conveniently and indiscriminately used for political myth-making. There have been comparisons between the 'good' British rule and the 'bad' Muslim rule". (Habib, 1994).

Communal ideology holds that Indian society is constituted by a number of religious communities, which is not only their major identity but also the main determinant of their politics, and accordingly the

politics is projected as the interaction of religious communities. Political allegiances are also related to this identity alone. And as "the notion of religious community claims a historical basis and takes the identity of community as far back as possible, so as to add to the legitimacy of the present identity, such identities are aimed at drawing in numbers of people" (Thapar, 1990).



Manufacturing "History"

On examining the methods followed by communalists, it becomes evident that they use history as the justification for communal ideology. In early 1920s and 30s it was argued that Hindus and Muslims constitute two separate nations and its justification was derived from historical misrepresentations. Later, Hindu communal ideologues like Savarkar and Golwalkar went on to manufacture the partisan answers to the

questions like : What is the Origin of our Nation? How did Hindu nation come into existence? In this way, history was distorted to suit their political projects. As a logical trajectory of this method Hindu communalists project and situate the ideal Hindu society in the ancient period, and then attribute the ills of society to Muslim invasions. This argument is invoked to also justify almost any and every restriction imposed on women and to account for what is perceived as a steady decline in the status of women from a condition of near-idyllic

bliss that prevailed during the Vedic era.

Further, there is the effort to derive 'identity' of the nation from its ancient past. This is one situation how history is mythified. But this justification of history can occur in also a number of other ways. Many a times outdated theories continue to be resurrected and reiterated, despite the emergence and availability of newer evidence, proving the contrary.

Historical analysis is an ongoing process. At times pre-conceived conclusions, necessary to fulfill political contingency, are used to determine the selection of evidence, and in this exercise, the evidence which is not in conformity with the 'necessary' conclusions is willfully ignored. Moreover, 'mythification of history is at one level a constant parallel to serious historical research, for it provides expression to romanticism and fantasy about the past. It increases in intensity during periods of social transition and insecurity when old orders are in abeyance and new ones are yet to come. But when mythification ceases to be fantasy and becomes the basis of the mobilisation of power and where there is political manipulation of history by substituting it with explanations created out of seeming historical evidence, then it needs to be exposed". (Seminar, 1989). Simultaneously, it is imperative to also debunk the colonial interpretation of Indian philosophical traditions that have so greatly influenced Indian historiography.

MYTH : Aryans were the original inhabitants of this land in that the Harappan culture was an Aryan culture.

FACT : The 'Theory of the Aryan' race arose 150 years ago. It is not referred to in any of the earlier Indian texts, whether the texts are in Sanskrit or Persian. Neither the Puranas nor the Vedas nor any of the Persian historians referred to the Aryans as a racial group. It is an invention of European thinkers, particularly the French racist, Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau who preached the "natural" inequality of the races in the mid-19th century. He divided European society into aristocracy, which is Aryan; the peasantry, which is non - Aryan. The 'add on' to this category is 'semites', the Jews, the traders. His thinking later formed the basis of future fascist onslaughts in Europe.

This myth was later accepted wholesale by a nationalist like Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak who further propounded the Theory of the Arctic Home of Vedas — that the Aryans came from Arctic region, and later, on way divided into two branches. One branch went to Europe and reverted back to barbarism, the other branch came to India and retained Aryan civilisation and revived Aryan culture all over the world. Similarly, but in a distinct vein. Keshub Chandra Sen a religious

reformer had maintained that the British being the descendants of the Aryans, as were the upper caste Indians, the advent of the British to India was like meeting of parted cousins. Later M.S. Golwalkar (Shri Guruji), the Sarasangh Chalak (2nd Supreme Dictator) of the RSS, in his, 'We are Our Nationhood Defined' presented a different interpretation of the Theory of the Aryan Race, to state that Hindus and Hindus alone were the original inhabitants of India. As per Guruji, 'We, Hindus, have been in undisputed and undisturbed possession of this land for over eight or even ten thousand years, before this land was invaded by any foreign race and therefore this land came to be known as Hindustan, the land of Hindus". (Golwalkar, 1939). Golwalkar considered Aryans and Hindus as synonymous, and even asserted that the Aryans did not migrate to India but were indigenous to this land.

On Tilak's theory of 'Arctic Home of the Vedas'. Golwalkar had maintained that the "Arctic zone was originally that part of the world which is today called Bihar and Orissa, that later moved north east and, then, in a sometimes northward movement, it came to its present position We do not hesitate in affirming that had this fact been discovered during the life time of Lokmanya Tilak, he would unhesitatingly have propounded the proposition that 'the Arctic Home of the Vedas' was verily in Hindustan itself and that it was not the Hindus who migrated to that land but the Arctic zone which emigrated and left the Hindus in Hindustan "(Golwalkar 1939, Page 8). However as Yechuri states," Even by the logic of his own argument, if the Arctic zone moved away from Bihar - Orissa, how could it leave the people behind who were inhabiting the land mass ? When a land mass moves it moves along with everything on it. People cannot be left hanging in a vacuum only to drop down when and where Golwalkar wishes !"

Believing in the centrality of Aryans origin in this region, Hindutva ideologues are unrelenting, trying to pick the thread from one to other, distorting newer findings to fit into their construct. For instance, they have tried to link the Harappa and Mohen-jo-daro cultures also to the Aryans thereby reversing the historically accepted sequence of events to state that the period of Rg Vedas ends by 3700 BC and is prior to Indus civilisation. Their ideologue Rajaram dates the beginning of Harappan civilisation to 3000 B.C. earlier than usual, but accepts the agreed terminal date as 1900 B.C. "(Ratnagar, 1996). As per Ratnagar "there are too many radio carbon dates now available for the Harappan sites to make possible any radical revision of Harappan chronology. Unlike geo-morphologists and archeologists who have worked in the field on the ancient process of desiccation of that river systems, this computer scientist, N.Rajaram, is certain that Saraswati ran dry precisely in 1900 B.C. So, the Rg Veda has to

be earlier than 1900 B.C. Moreover the Harappan civilisation ended because Saraswati ceased to flow, that in turn having resulted from a 'calamitous drought' and - yes ! - the melting of ice caps following the ending of last Ice Age' (Rajaram 1995). Rajaram further states that when that happened the elite amongst the Aryans in a 'massive out flow' migrated west via Iran. Among the significant outcomes of that movement is the origin of Egyptian pyramid in Vedic smasana-cit (Aryan Invasion of India, Pg.50 (Rajaram, 1993).

The other "school" on the origin of Aryans posited the view that they came from Asia, but this immediately raised the question as to how can our ancestors have come from Asia, as this was the high point of imperialism and Asian countries were subject colonies. To get around this problem, they substituted it with the argument that Aryans were indigenous to India. This view is in line with the communal thinking which appropriates the indigenous status to itself and thereby the rightful status as theirs of the land.

Max Mueller, an Orientalist applied this theory to India. Orientalists were a school of thought who were fighting a losing battle with the Utilitarians an ethical theory founded by an English moralist and writer on law, J. Bentham (1748-1832). He held that the coming of British to India was a 'God sent' event, meant to 'civilise' India. Orientalists intrusion in the Indian past was an effort to bring back the 'declining' social norms in their own fast changing society. They uncritically held the Ancient Indian society as the ideal one, overlooking its inner contradictions and tensions. "They evolved a theory of the Indo-European homeland and of the common ancestry of the Sanskrit and Greek cultures. The Aryans were seen as a racial entity rather than a group of people who spoke related languages, and the dynamics of Aryan culture in India and Greek were sought to be related (Thapar, 1994). This viewpoint of idyllic ancient Indian society fitted well into the wishes of the orthodox Hindus, who wholeheartedly adopted this view.

Mueller also evolved the theory that there was an invasion of Aryans into north-western India and after subjugating the local Dasas they settled down in India, bringing with them their culture and civilisation -- the Sanskrit language, Vedic religion, etc. Mueller saw this event as a kind of a civilising mission : that the Dasas were very primitive, not developed or advanced and the Aryans came to civilise them; that the upper castes in India, sometimes referred to as 'dvija' (twice born castes, Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya in the Varma system), are all descendants of Aryans, and so they are demarcated from lower caste" (Thapar).

In reaction, Christian missionaries wrote that the Aryans, the upper castes, oppressed the lower castes.

Another reaction was the from Hindutva ideologues who insisted that all castes Hindus are Aryas, and so coined the term Hindu Aryas. They further said that there was no invasion as they were indigenous people -- India being their Pitrabhumi (Fatherland) and Punyabhumi (Holyland), and that they spread from India to all over Asia and Europe.

In line with the latest archeological findings, and linguistic interpretations, Indian culture dates back to 6000 B.C. Its most discernible manifestation is the Harappan Civilisation and also the most distinct and decipherable civilisation of this region. It declined in the second millennium BC and completely disintegrated by 1500 B.C. when Aryans entered northwest of India. 'The Aryans or Indo-Aryans descendants of the Indo-Europeans had remained for some time in Bactria (Northern Afghanistan). By about 1500 B.C., however, they had migrated into northern India through the passes of the Hindu Kush mountains. At first they wandered across the plains of Punjab, searching for pasture- land being, predominantly a cattle breeding people. Finally they settled in small village communities in forests and gradually took to agriculture". (Romila Thapar, 1966), and went on to produce Rg Veda and other Vedic texts.

Contrary to the claims of Hindu communalists Vedic society is no longer regarded the foundation of Indian civilisation because a very different civilisation, the Harappan Civilisation, had already preceded it and which was comparatively more advanced.

Hindutva historians argue that the Harappan Civilisation and Vedic Aryans are identical and now date the Vedas back to the period of Harappan Civilisation which they maintain is the archeological counterpart of the Vedic civilisation. However, as borne out also by linguistic analysis the Harappan Civilisation was essentially an urban one, based on an urban culture, while the Vedic civilisation according to Vedic texts itself, was predominantly a pastoral, rural society with no mention of an urban culture.

When he wrote over a hundred years ago, Mueller had assumed that Vedic Sanskrit is the earliest and purest form of Sanskrit, and was a pure Aryan language. Today, however, the examination of its grammar proves that it is not "pure". Some elements of proto-Dravidian grammar are apparent in Vedic Sanskrit (See below for further details) There occurs a mixture in language with the arrival of Aryans and there are many words which are Indo - Aryan in origin (e.g. Pangala word from a proto-Dravidian or Mundari language spoken by central Indian Adivasi area finds its place in Sanskrit). Thus there was a symbiosis of different people living side-by-side, and with Sanskrit this intermingling goes on increasing with time.

Romila Thapar (VAK 1996) shows that "the language

has come from outside, from Iran, probably brought by small groups of people for which we have archeological evidence. These migrants were usually pastoralists or small-scale farmers, who over many hundred of years were bringing in new language, which was also changing in the process. Then when they settled in India, the language in India also undergoes change because of Indian connections. Therefore we argue that there may not have been an invasion, we don't have the archeological evidence for a huge, large - scale invasion as Max Mueller insists, but there were multiple migrations and there is evidence, from archaeology for the migration. So in a sense it is unimportant to go on saying : We are indigenous, because we can never prove it. We are, in fact very mixed up. Aryan is not a race because we all use this term very loosely and speak about Aryan race and the Dravidian race : the terms do not refer to race but to the language used."

The myth of Aryan race identified language with race. Max Mueller observed that all those who spoke Aryan languages (Sanskrit in India, Iranian in Iran, Greek, Latin, Gaelic etc.) belong to the same race. The monogenesis thesis traced back all three languages to Indo - European and peoples biological origin was traced to a single race. The work on biological race which has been done over years shows that in terms of genetic make up, in terms of relationships of various group, the area of northern India comprises of a huge, multiple variety of people, variety of races and one cannot talk of a single race. "Therefore the notion that there was once a pure Aryan race and every body that spoke a particular language belonged to that race is complete nonsense. These (Aryan, Dravidian) are not races, these are not biological races, these are language terms ... " (Romila Thapar 1996).

MYTH : The Indus Script is a Vedic script

FACT : First and foremost, although the excavation of ruins do indeed advance our understanding of civilisations they do not by the same token serve as keys to unraveling the secrets of ancient societies and civilisations. The master key, instead, to its secrets are in its scripts -- inscribed primarily on seals including amulets and other objects.

As far as the seals with inscriptions on them of the Harappan sites are concerned there are approximately 3,500 inscribed texts, although the average number of signs in a text is less than five. However, the most authentic pronouncement of this Harappan script is that it has not been fully deciphered. The script is an unknown script; written in an unknown language. It does not appear in a bi-lingual context; does not survive on any monument, and which must be deciphered from

short texts. Decipherment has been a slow process of understanding the structure of the language by establishing the internal logic of the script, by comparison with other scripts, and by comparative linguistics.

Innumerable claims have been made in the attempt to crack the decipherment of the Indus Script. None have been validated including the myth in question that the Vedic text, 'Nighantu of Yaska' has supposedly aided in cracking the 'Rosetta Stone' (the Rosetta Stone, discovered by Napoleon's army in Egypt in 1799 was the key to the later decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs as it had the same text written in Greek hieroglyphs) of Hindu historians fail to state what exactly the 'Nighantu' contains (Is it a bilingual text, or example?);

* Further, the 'Nighantu' (c.700 B.C.) is a commentary that had been recorded to explain rituals and the etymology of certain unclear words in the Rig Veda. It has also no reference to scripts of any type:

* The dating of the seals on which the script were inscribed — between 3000-2000 B.C. — is incorrect because the date of the early phase of the Harappan Civilisation itself is 3600 to 2600 B.C., when no script was in existence; and the mature phase to 2600-1800 B.C., when there was a script. The Rig Veda was written between 1500 and 1000 B.C.

Contrary to the claim, the Harappan script is instead considered by scholars like the Finnish scholar Asko Parpola to be a non-Aryan particularly Dravidian one. He maintains that the "writing of the Harappan script is from right to left (like Urdu or the old Kharoshthi - Comet Project) but since they are on seals, which are used for impressions, it appears that it is in the opposite direction... Secondly, if the Harappan civilisation was post-Vedic, why is there no evidence of the horse in the remains of that civilisation? We know from the Vedas that the horse was very important to that society. A number of animals are depicted on Indus seals, and the skeletal remains of a number of animals have also been found. But there is no evidence of the horse. Why?" (Frontline, February 21, 1997)

Communalism and History

INTERVIEW

The following is an excerpt of a talk by Prof. Romila Thapar presented at a workshop on "Communalism and History" held by our Organisation at Khandala.

Q. Why is it that historians in particular are so concerned about communal ideology, the ideology of the communalists? Why is it that economists,

sociologists and others who are in the social sciences are less concerned while historians are constantly debating the ideology that is put out by communalism?

A. The answer to that question is that Firstly communal ideology always uses history for its justification. We had this with Muslim communalism in the 1920's & the 30's, when it was argued that Hindus and Muslims constitute two separate nations, two separate communities and very soon community becomes nation and there is talk about two separate nations. So you have to talk about the Hindu nation and the Muslim nation. This idea is also picked up by Hindu communal writing, in the concept of Hindutva in the 1920's and 30's.

But in addition to that, it is also a concern ... that when the Hindutva movement starts, in the writings of people like Savarkar and Golwalkar, their concern is with things like: What is the origin of our nation? How did the Hindu nation come into existence? And if you are concerned with the origins of a people or a community or a nation, automatically you go to history.

Secondly, what is the identity of our nation, as origin and identity is closely tied in? What is the history by which a particular nation comes to be established? So that again is a concern, a question which the historians have to answer, it is a question in which history is brought into discussion. And thirdly, as more recently we have witnessed in the movement around the Ramjanmabhoomi, there is also the argument that we can undo the wrongs of the past and re-do, as it were, re-create the balance by certain actions. So, if there was a temple at Ayodhya and it was destroyed by Babar to build a mosque, then if we destroy the mosque, we are in fact making the score equal. One kind of vandalism is received by another kind of vandalism, one kind of vandalism deserves another kind of vandalism.

But what is the purpose of all this mosque destruction today? Is that a reply to the Muslims destroying temples in the past? So there is that element that we are settling this score of the past. This is again something which one has to be very careful about, because the basic question still remains: can you today settle the scores of the past?

You may use some of the problems that the past has created, some of the issues, the situations that the past history of society has created for the present, and try and make that situation better, try and take away the nastiness of the problems. But can you really in fact settle scores like this? Can you pretend that you are putting right what went wrong in the past?

So, this really means that the interpretation of history becomes very important as does the role of the historians in the building up or the opposing of a communal ideology. Consequently, many of us have

argued that it is not enough just to write about the past. When the past is being misrepresented, when the past is being abused, when the past is being exploited for an ideology like a communal ideology, then the historian has to enter the political debate. One has to participate in the debate and point out that this is not the way in which history should be.

This then leads me to another point and that is, that very often you get a complete fabrication, a made up story which is passed on by communal ideology as history. For example, the supposed history of Ayodhya, which you get from the writings of the VHP and from the videos that they produced, and the articles that they have written, where they locate, an exact spot in Ayodhya as the birth place of Ram, and of there being a temple located at that spot which was destroyed by Babar and a mosque put up, and so on.

Q. Can Faith be the basis of History?

A. The argument runs not that this is what we believe happened. As long as it's a matter of belief, the historians really can't intervene except to say this belief cannot be taken as history. But when they start claiming that this is history and it is historically proven that this was the birth place of Ram and there was a temple over there and so on, then the historian has to say, No, there is no historical evidence at all. This was the reason why some of us produced that little pamphlet which you might have seen, the political abuse of history. The argument was that this is not historically proven. Today we have a much sharper and clearer notion of what is historical evidence and how one proves historical evidence. And if the evidence is not there, then in today's history one cannot say that this is historically correct and it is historically proven.

So there is a difference between the historian's interpretation of the past and the interpretation which communal ideology tries to introduce into the history of India. Now, this is an important difference, it is something we must be clear about because very often the argument is made that: "But this is history. History tells us that this is the birth place of Ram, history tells us that there was a temple over here".

The question is: Do historians accept it? How do historians argue? There are some historians who accept the birth place and the temple. But, then, you have to ask: Those that support its being the birth place of Ram, how do they argue and those historians that are opposing this idea, how do they argue? So in a sense it is not enough to say, is it correct or not that this was the birth place? You have to understand what the arguments are. And this is where the role of historian again becomes extremely important because the historian is not accepting a popular view, whatever that popular

view may be. The historian's view is different and you must acquaint yourself with what is the historian's view.

Q. What is the difference between language and race?

A. I have to go back a little into history at this point. You all know the difference between language and race. Language is what we speak, what we think in, what we write in; race is what we believe biologically to be the category to which we belong. There is something biological about race, its our ancestry, it is the people we are related to, the group we belong to. It is now said that there is no such thing as Aryan race. Max Mueller argued that the people who spoke Aryan languages, and the Aryan languages are Sanskrit in India, Iranian in Iran, Greek, Latin, the Celtic languages, German, some of the Baltic languages and so on, that the people who spoke the same language belong to the same 'race'. This was what is called mono-genesis or a single origin. All these languages were traced back to a single language, which was then called Indo-European, and the origin physical, biological of the people was traced back to a single race and it was called the Aryan race. This was the mistake which Max Mueller and others made. Language can never be equated with race.

Let me illustrate this with an example which I frequently quote. If, for example, in the year 4000 A.D., two thousand years from now, if the civilisation of the United States becomes a ruin archaeologists excavating in North America, the United States, discover the language that had been in use in the U.S. What would they discover? They will discover English, they will discover American English to be more correct. All over, north, south, east, west from the lowest level to the highest level in society, with everybody using that one language. Now if on the basis of that one language you say that everybody who lived in the U.S. in the 19th and 20th century belonged to a single race, you can realise how completely erroneous the idea is.

Now, Max Mueller and others were doing exactly the same thing. They were saying that all these people from India, Iran, West Asia, Europe, right upto Ireland, they were all using languages from the same source, related languages, therefore, they were all related people. Now the work that had been done on biological race over the years since Max Mueller wrote shows that in terms of biological race, that is, in terms of our genetic make up, in terms of our relationships to various group, the area of northern India comprises a huge, multiple variety of people, variety of races; one cannot talk about a single race. Therefore, the notion that there was once a pure Aryan race and everybody that spoke a particular language belonged to that race is complete nonsense, there is absolutely no validity to it. So do make the correction if people talk to you about the Aryan race and the Dravidian race. These are not races, these are not

biological races, these are language terms, they are simply people speaking a particular language, speaking a Aryan-related language in one case or they are speaking a Dravidian-related language in the other.

Q. Is this way — the deeds of kings, emperors etc. — the right way to look at history?

A. The point that I want to make is that when we consider any period of history, we must always ask ourselves a question: Who's history are we talking about? Are we talking about the history only of elite groups, are we only going to base our information on court chronicles and religious texts because we are concerned only with upper caste history or are we not also concerned with the history of the whole of society which takes us to the lowest social strata. If we are concerned with that, then we have to look at the texts and the archaeological data linked to people lower down the social scale. Most of these texts of people that belonged to either the lower levels of society or who are outside the mainstream of Sanskrit culture or Persian culture are in what we today call regional languages. They are in Marathi, they are in Bengali, they are in old Hindi, in Tamil, Telugu, and so on. And the historians who have been writing on this subject until very recently have been using only Persian, Turkish and Sanskrit texts. Therefore, the expression, the articulation, the feelings, the beliefs, the ideas of people lower down the social scale have not entered into history books. Our history text books are still concerned only with the elite sections of society.

When one starts looking at this kind of data one finds a very interesting mixing between Hindu belief and thought and Islamic belief and thought. I mentioned the name of Ekanatha who wrote a text called the "Hindu Turk Samvada" where he discusses the differences in religious beliefs between his own sect and Islamic belief. It's a very rich and vigorous discussion in which unpleasant things are said on both sides. But eventually he says; that we have to live together and therefore we have to learn to understand each other. In Marathi, for example, by the end of the eighteenth century there is a strong tradition of texts where very deliberate attempts are made to try and weave together the mythology of Vaishnavism and Shaivism and stories connected with Islamic origins, the Quran and so on. And then there is also one of my favourite quotations from a famous text called the "Brihat Shavara Tantra" which was written in a mixture of Sanskrit and Hindi. It dates to about the 15th century. It is very interesting because it is full of mantras for various situations: if you want to bear a male child you must recite this mantra, if your child falls ill you must recite these other mantras, if you are getting married and want a happy married life you must recite yet other mantras and so on. For all these important points in one's life time there are different

mantras. There is one which says that when a child is sick or when you want to remove an obstacle, the mantra is not to Shri Ganesha, the mantra is to Mahmood of Ghazni. Now this is something so curious. The removal of obstacles I can understand, but why when your child is sick would you invoke Mahmood of Ghazni?

Now, I'm just giving a little taste of the kind of issues that come up if one begins to look for a different kind of historical data. Once you move out of the elite circles and you go into these popular traditions you meet with a different culture altogether, a culture which does not suggest a monolithic Hindu and Muslim society. Let me conclude, then, by saying that I'm not arguing that because there were no two monolithic communities: Hindu and Muslim in permanent conflict, that there were a number of communities that were constantly in harmony. I'm not arguing that peaceful co-existence and permanent harmony is not what the picture is. The picture is that you have a number of small communities, that are negotiating with each other all the time that they are, in fact, talking to each other, having a dialogue, seeing how they can adjust to each other. There is a certain amount of give and take, there is perhaps more take and give in some cases, there is hostility in some cases and there is an absence of hostility in other cases. But, then, until we start examining how these small communities lived and co-existed, we will not even begin to understand how Indian society essentially functioned. And, therefore, the plea that one makes is that please let us shift our vision from the history of rulers and court circles to looking at the reality of history which is much more the kind of text that we have from groups that are not connected with the ruling class. There is an absolute range of such texts; we haven't even begun to explore them as historians, but these kinds of alternative reading of history are therefore extremely important.

Q. Why is all this not reflected in the history that is taught in our schools?

A. Our problem today is that every time we say that we would like to change the books and write in a new fashion we are told that we have to conform to the syllabus. So one answer to the question is that the majority of historians who teach in most universities in India are not really thinking along these lines. Therefore, those historians who think conventionally are very often the ones who are put on to text book committees. So, the text book syllabus remains a conventional syllabus.

When it comes to the regional level, you find that in the states, due to some particular minister of education taking a somewhat different attitude, saying, this and this aspect should be included in teaching history in

the state. We did a study of history textbooks for students from eight to twelfth standard in Madras. We found that a sentence or two apart here and there, there was an attempt in these books to strike a balance. It would seem then that in some areas or states there is a larger interest in the whole subject of history. In the Tamil Nadu case for example when you are looking at Dravidian history, you will necessarily undermine a lot of national prototypes. This is a major problem which I think needs to be tackled.

In Maharashtra, the text-books committee for history had found that some of the textbooks biased. It undertook the task of removing these distortions but just before the new texts could be finalised, somebody leaked the story to the press and the reaction of parochial politicians sabotaged the whole exercise.

But also, there is a group working in M.P. the Ekalavya Group. They produced history text books which are superior to anything we have written. But they were having great difficulties with the BJP government. It was a stroke of luck that the BJP was voted out in M.P. so they could carry on.

I think that one has to concede that history is much more interpretive than the natural sciences. As you know, even in the natural sciences today, the idea of an absolute objectivity is being doubted. Nevertheless, the point is that objective history is not something which is static, objective history also changes as one goes along. One may have a particular interpretation from an objective point of view of history and it may begin to change in a later generation. New evidence and fresh interpretations have to be incorporated.

Secondly, precisely because we have a society in which there are multiple views of history and multiple claims to "This is my history, therefore, I believe what I am saying is historically true", it is very necessary that there must be people who say, no, sorry, your view of history is prejudiced because of such and such. Now this is an ongoing debate in society, it's not as if there is a finality to history. I'm not claiming that the kind of interpretation I'm making is absolutely final. I mean tomorrow somebody may come along and say: that's not true, I have got evidence of this kind. My interpretation then will have to face that evidence and that argument. But it is very necessary in any society that there be historians who are relatively much more objective than others, who are questioning these very particularistic versions of history which are claiming to be objective. That debate must be constant.

Q. How does one deal with local traditions & history?

A. What we were talking about yesterday that many of us who belong to the secular tradition don't really have

a feel for local history. It is very important that one goes into the question of local history and does it intelligently and says that you know this, this and this is possible but this is definitely not possible. So one has to force oneself to take an interest in local culture and local history. I believe the RSS is engaged in a massive project of going into local history. I think in the next ten years, they plan to go into each, district, each local area, and produce their versions of local history. It is therefore necessary that secular historians and groups also take serious interest in understanding local history.

Q. Can secular historians afford to bypass events and incidents of conflicts in history, say, destruction of temples or mosques or whatever. How does one face such historical reality?

A. No. I don't think one should bypass it. I think bypassing has been a fatal mistake. We have bypassed

and that's incorrect. I think it is necessary to make the unsavoury parts of our history public and to explain why they happened, explain why this attitude was rampant at that time and explain precisely that we have moved on, we are not the uncivilised people that say the Portuguese Jesuits were who demanded the destruction of temples and mosques. We don't do that any more. I mean one uses that as an example to explain how our understanding of ourselves and the world around us has changed. But I don't think we should bypass it at all, its very necessary to talk about this past. And the argument should not be that because they endorsed the destruction of temples we today must endorse the destruction of mosques. No, we can't totally understand, no we can't recreate the past, but we can move towards the greater understanding of the past, that's really all that one is trying to argue.

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