Accessing the Past

Dialogues on History and Education

Proceedings of the 11th Wipro Partners Forum

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PREFACE

The word History immediately conjures in our mind images of the past. A past which is gone and over with, which cannot be changed. But still demands of us to know it better, the desire to know and understand the past and how things came to be the way they are today. History is instrumental in defining a community's identity, that the past is possibly not only something that is over, but that it is part of a continuum leading to the present and hence to a future.

In schools history is seen as a series of facts which need to be memorized. These facts tell us "a story" about ourselves and help children "know" our unitary, collective past. That is all History has to offer and hence it is not "useful" in the sense that Science or Mathematics are. But what could an alternative conception of History education be?

The desire and the need to engage with the idea of History in the Wipro Partners' Forum came from the understanding that education reform is an engagement with "change" in a concerted manner. Sreekanth elaborated on this in the opening remarks – "Reform is a change that necessitates a deep understanding of what is the social reality of today". And a deeper understanding of History is an important part of the answer.

Apart from questions and discussions on history itself and its methodology, there were discussions on how History meets Education, what is it to include History in education and how does one see it has implications to curriculum. How does one teach History then?

Prof. Neeladri Bhattacharya in the opening presentation investigated the question - What is History? His perspective is clearly that of the impossibility of clearly and firmly being scientific and objective in the process of writing or reading History. He dwelled at length on the issues with the positivist framework of unravelling the truth that was. He explored the implications of this to the discipline that History is, the methods Historians choose, the juxtaposition of History and Fiction. That there is exclusion in mainstream popular history and there could be and there are multiple narratives.

Prof. Kancha Ilaiah's presentation was a strident criticism of popular Indian History.

His talk “was” a Dalit Bahujan narrative, many aspects of which mainstream or known Indian history completely excludes. He elaborated on the issue that there is technology, science and a work ethic in the Dalit history which is completely ignored or even if seen, looked down upon, by mainstream history.

Kumkum Roy wrote an article that briefly touches upon two critical issues with history - the exclusion of women and the complete absence of a woman’s perspective. She dwells on some of the challenges in bringing this perspective into history as well as the changes that have happened on this front. Further, using a case study of French revolution in NCERT text book, she demonstrates how a teacher can introduce gender history in classrooms.

Subbu in his session walked everyone through the process of Historrically interpreting a text from Gond oral literature. A text that has many “factual” contradictions and since undocumented it would not serve as a reliable archive if taken literally. But when we see the metaphors and the motifs as indicative of how a community saw themselves, it turns into a rich archive to understand an entire community of people. He elaborated on the method of the historian - the way evidence is accumulated, the sciences like archaeology, epigraphy, critical theory, linguistics which support the rigorous process of interpreting the archive.

Vignettes from the open discussion session on the last day, were a consolidation and reflection of what the earlier sessions unpacked. The connection to pedagogical and curricular issues and extensive debate on them makes it a rich repository of perspectives and information. The point that came up most starkly was - History needs to be understood to be layered, often incomplete and a continuous process of rediscovery of the past as well as the present and also a way to understand how History itself is written.

There are a few important notions that could not be analyzed or critiqued. As an example Some historian have sought to discover a large organizing theme, meaning, or direction in human history. This may take the form of an effort to demonstrate how history reveals a large pattern or plays out an important theme. [Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy

of History] For example, a series of events that occurred in the Renaissance period in Europe (12th to 16th century) led to moving out of the dark middle ages into modernity and industrialization. This assumption or causation makes History political and each narrative holds a stake in the direction we want ourselves and society to go. A critique of this perspective is that it is difficult to attribute causal relationships between historical events – we cannot conclusively state that one event happened because of another.

All this means a lot with respect to the History curriculum – content, what is taught, how it is taught, how learning happens, how it is assessed. The NCF 2005 and subsequently the NCERT textbooks are exemplars of how these issues could be dealt with. This is just a beginning because the new NCERT textbooks demonstrate a radically different way of engaging with History and is a big shift for educators who are used to teaching History in a certain manner. The textbook needs to be combined with an awareness of how History as a discipline has evolved.

This book tries to address this need to some extent. It is an edited transcript of the talks and subsequent discussions and debates. As part of the Wipro Applying Thought In Schools initiative, publishing and disseminating this publication is an attempt to include educators in the process of understanding the state the discipline of History is at today. And what it means to our understanding of teaching and learning History.

Hope you will enjoy reading this and that it will be useful for you as an educator.

Sreekanth • Shaheen • Prakash

Disclaimer: Needless to say, as much as we tried to be objective, the process of editing encountered all the issues rewriting History involves - subjective selection, occasional interpretative paraphrasing and possibly inadvertent oversight. So this is only one possible narrative...

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A lot of effort went into the 11th Wipro Partners' Forum happening the way it did and this book to come into being. We wish to record our acknowledgements and thanks to :

The CFL school and everyone there. Special thanks to Ashok and Terlingappa who paid so much attention to finer details of the event and made all of us feel at home.

Subbu who helped us conceptualize the 3 days, connected us to historians who have done invaluable work in this area. He ensured we were covering enough ground and topical debates in the discipline come to the fore, enriching the debate on where and how History meets the educational endeavour.

All the historians we spoke to in course of planning the event, from whom we got valuable inputs and the conversations helped us know the amount of work happening in History in India.

Prof. Neeladri Bhattacharya for the beautiful talk and the enthusiastic engagement in late night discussions and debates with everyone.

Prof. Kancha Ilaiah for making us aware of the limitations and problems with what we understand as Indian history.

J Shankar for the illuminating talk on the history of some economic concepts and a preview of his forthcoming book.

Prof Kumkum Roy, who unfortunately could not come for the event, but was very kind and helped by writing an article.

Venkatesh Onkar sharing his experiences and thoughts on History teaching in his article. This article was critical to really demonstrate how the Historian's method can be engaged with in a classroom.

Pt. Pushpraj Koshti for the immensely moving performance on the surbahar. Words can not do any justice to the experience.

Maitreyee for the exceptional and high quality transcription and the editing help.

Radhika Menon of Tulika Publishers for being so kind and adventurous and bringing out this book at such short notice.

Karishma Menon for being true to her name and appearing when she did; and helping us with the book design.

Satyen Tripathi the other godsent who translated the Gondwani text into English at such short notice!

Khyaliram-ji and Vishwambhar for helping with typing in the Gondwani text.

And many others who were helpful and party to this endeavour in various forms.

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Opening Remarks

The theme for this forum is History. There were many motivations to choose History as a theme.

One of the motivations is that it helps us understand "change". Most of us work with schools and we talk about the need for school education reform. Reform is a change that necessitates a deep understanding of what is the social reality of today, what happened in the past, what are the key trends if any and what is an educationist's response to these changes. History is a key contributor to this understanding and that makes it an important topic for us.

There are two aspects to change: a "what is out there" aspect and a "what should we rather have" aspect. It is important to understand what is out there and the most important aspect of this is to understand the social institutions that we see today: representative democracy, money, gender and caste relations, ideas of progress and development, science & technology etc...

Often it would seem that we see these ideas as if they are like gravity. There are even economists who say that "self-interest" in economics is like gravity in Physics! Is this really so? Are these institutions like "natural" laws or were they constituted by changing processes in the past and hence are themselves amenable to further change in future as human purposes change?

Let me take an example: There are people who say that entire USA's agriculture is done by 3% of the population.Agriculture is a low productivity area for 60% of population to be in, like it is in India and so what we need is a re-skilling so that these people can move to other sectors like industries and that this is one of the key social problems that schools are supposed to solve.

Some others may say that our schooling system of today, at least the way it is largely, is designed for industrial era to train factory workers and that's the reason why we have these periods and opening bells etc. What we need is a new kind of education that is free from the clutches of these restrictive schools.

Such broad statements hide many assumptions. There are assumptions about what is good for society and surely there are assumptions about what happened in the past and is happening...

In these 3 days, we have put together a series of sessions engaging with various aspects of history. Together they form a 'story'. While each session is independent and complete in itself, to connect to the questions related to education, we would have to weave them together as they happen.

We first take a look the Historians Craft Today. Is there a method in history? What are these methods? What are the questions they address? Is it about describing the past or are there embedded in it ideas for the future? Is there an objective "fact"? Where are the key questions within history in India? What are the new developments? This is the key focus of today's sessions.

Then tomorrow we look at history through different perspectives. There is always a link between what we think happened and what we think "should" happen. It is tempting to caricaturise history. The attempts to periodise it as Hindu, Muslim etc being a pertinent example of this. These kind of broad brush strokes are made to serve the purposes of various ideologies. However it is in being able to see history from different perspectives that we protect ourselves from any errors of generalisation, errors of simplification.

Any look at the past & broad diagnoses and prescriptions for the future may hide deep flaws that we may talk about in retrospect. So giving space to alternate views is a matter of critical importance.

There is the sub-altern perspective to history where we look at history from the perspective of those who have been outside of the power structures of societies. This raises many issues that otherwise don't come to be discussed, like the issue of "perceived indignity of some kinds of labour".

Historians are now looking outside the archives like text into the artefacts of popular culture and other non-text sources like literature, visual artefacts, cinema etc. We then take a look at this to see what perspectives can develop when we look at advertisements, oral literature, cinema as a source of historical knowledge.

Can we link these to our educational issues and debates? Can we learn from this? The success of this forum will be in having wide participation especially drawing from life experiences and experiences in engaging with teachers, schools and in the classroom. We will have dedicated sessions where we draw linkages between History and Education.

Sreekanth Sreedharan

History — Discipline, Craft and Narratives

Neeladri Bhattacharya

- *Nature of History*
- *Craft of a Historian*
- *Archives*
- *Narratives In Indian History*
- *Conversations*
- *Conclusions*

Neeladri Bhattacharya is a professor at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. His research and publications have been on the making of the colonial rural order, on custom, law, and colonialism, and on colonial power and discourse. He has also been active participant in public debates in India on the writing of history and interpretations of the past. He also headed the team which worked on the NCERT history text books in 2006.

History – Discipline, Craft and Narratives

Neeladri Bhattacharya

Nature of History

I, along with many others – about 60-70 of us historians in India – were involved recently in the rewriting of the school textbooks – the NCERT textbooks. This was part of a wider effort to rework all the textbooks, not just History. Mathematics, Political Science, Sciences, everything was re-worked after 2006.

Rewriting of History immediately becomes a political issue and hits the headlines, unlike other subjects. that rewriting is a part of the writing of History. Historians have to, always, rewrite . Why do they have to?

But, rewriting of History immediately becomes a political issue and hits the headlines, unlike other subjects. Consequently, the idea of rewriting itself has become suspect. In popular conception, rewriting involves essentially political battles – between the communal and secular, the Congress and BJP and so on, and intellectual historical knowledge is subservient to otherwise political issues. I would like to argue that rewriting is a part of the writing of History. Historians have to, always, rewrite .

Why do they have to? This Rewriting being an integral part of History writing, leads us to the question – what is the craft of the historian? How do we define it? How has the notion changed over time – what do we mean by History, how do historians perceive and look at History, and how do they look at their own craft, which has not remained constant?

Over the last 150 years, since History in the modern sense has come into being, the historian's concept of what it ought to do has changed. It is this change I will try to focus on, and then end with a series of comments on why History is such a political issue and how History will remain, inevitably, always a political issue. What we mean by that politics is something that we can debate. What is the problematic nature of that politics, we can debate. What is the nature of those linkages, we can discuss. But we cannot get History away from politics. Politics here is not in the narrow sense – a manipulation or an instrument of political power – but in a wider sense. That History opens up particular visions of the world, allows us a relationship with the world, allows us to narrate ourselves into the present. History defines for ourselves, a location - within a tradition, within a past.

When we look at history, we find that all nations, all communities and all classes, in the act of coming into being, have rewritten their histories. The French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, modernization of Europe – the emergence of the modern European republic – meant a critique of earlier forms of History and writing of a new type of History. By rewriting, they open up a vision which allowed new communities, new groups and new classes to define a sense of self and to legitimize a particular vision of the world. And they narrate themselves into History by rewriting that History. Dalits have rewritten their History. Women, in critiquing patriarchal societies, have had to rewrite their history. Writing of History becomes intimately connected to the definition of women's selves and their relationship with patriarchal structures within society.

Any form of re-definition of self implies a redefinition of our relationship within the world, and a redefinition of our relationship with our past. And History deals with this – our relationship with the world today and our relationship with the past. So we cannot possibly get away from the politics of our times. We cannot get away from the politics which is implied in our relationship to the past. To say this itself may appear problematic, because there is also the commonsense view. If there is a commonsense view that History always raises these political issues, why should there be a debate?

Because, ultimately, History is about knowing the truth of the past. In the commonsensical view, even now, how can there be debates about facts in History? Facts have been defined, they have been stated. We know what the past is, and if you debate that, it is, in some sense, a manipulation of facts. You are distorting, you are manipulating, you are biased, you are prejudiced.

Is it always only that? Is there one true History waiting to be told? Very often we think, in the commonsensical notion – and it is not just the commonsensical, that has been the tradition of writing History from the 19th century till very recently, and we have been really re-thinking that notion now; but historians are still embedded within this – that there is one true past waiting to be discovered; the task of the historian is to discover the past as it really was, and by looking at the records, looking at the archives and exploring the past, we write the history over time, part by part. It is what has come to be known as the positivist notion of History, a notion which has been critiqued over time, although it dominated historical writing till very, very recently – say, till the 50s and 60s. Historians lived in an age of innocence, where they felt that the task of the historian was – as the positivists said – to discover the past as it really was.

This task could be fulfilled by going to the archives, doing research, discovering the documents and the facts embedded in them, collecting them and putting together the story of the past. So the discovery of the document, the evidence and the archive became critical to this knowledge of the past. But the notion here was that this craft of the historian – this process of discovery – was to be done objectively, scientifically, truthfully and without prejudices, keeping the subjectivities of the historian aside. A historian approaching a document should be aware of his subjectivity and should not allow it to interpret the facts. Interpretation was out; and facts collected, collated, and produced as they were.

This meant several types of separation. Firstly, it was assumed that it was possible to collect evidence without interpretation – that one could, through a process of pure induction, acquire knowledge without any form of deduction. Leave aside deductions and interpretations, those things bring in prejudices and biases. What you need to do is to merely collect facts over time and there will be a time when the entire past will reveal itself. And there is no more research to be done. This

was the claim of Acton who, in an introduction to the Cambridge History of the World in the late 19th century said, 'I can see universal history emerging. There will be a time, soon enough, when there will be no more need to rewrite history because everything will be known'.

So the craft of the historian, in this sense, was collation of material, collection of actual data, digging into the archives and compiling records – more and more evidence. This produced what is commonly associated with History – a History crammed with facts and dates.

When you go into the archives and begin to look for material, you will see – and that was the notion of the archive at the time – you go and begin to look at official material. In the past, it told about kings and queens; in the present, it tells about the government - in England, the Liberals and the Conservatives, their debates, their discussions, what they are doing… the changes in Governor-Generals in the colonial countries, from Ripon, Lytton, Curzon – all those things. Medieval histories speak of which dynasty followed who, because that is the political event recorded in the chronicles of those rulers. You know about Akbar, Aurangzeb, Jehangir, Noor Jehan and a whole lot of others. These are mostly male histories – about men who have dominated and controlled and defined. So History became essentially political. History was about what could be discovered in the (official) documents. It was factual, in the sense that it was denuded of interpretation. Whether that is possible or not is a different issue.

The positivist notion of truth in the 19th century, which is – not just historians, everyone shared it – that the object out there has a "facticity", reality and truth and meaning embedded within the object, regardless of how one looked at that object. So, if this is a table, it is a table because the "table-ness" of the table was embedded within the table itself, and did not depend on being defined as a table.

One could question that today. History is no longer viewed in that sense. The table becomes a table when you know it as a table – a person who does not know it as a table cannot regard it as one. Therefore, the concept of the table, the category of the table, the culture and history of the table come into

being – the history of a table as a piece of furniture. Now, we can do a history of how a table as a (piece of) furniture comes into being, and how the histories of the window, to the histories of the housing, to the histories of the table to histories of sitting – all those things come into being. So, can we think of the object just out there, waiting to be discovered? A table is recognized as a table because the mind reflects and recognizes it as a table – not because one constitutes it as a table. This is very important in the understanding of history and I'll try to make that connection here.

The search for facts, the obsession with archives, politics, kings, queens, dynasties, dates and facts came from a particular notion of made histories of the time inevitably state-centric, dynasty-centric, ruler-centric, male, date-centric and so on. They became narratives of wars, the rise and fall of dynasties and changes of rulers.

The search for facts, the obsession with archives, politics, kings, queens, dynasties, dates and facts came from a particular notion of History – a particular archive that the historian discovered and considered his own. Being an official archive produced by political powers, it made histories of the time inevitably state-centric, dynasty-centric, ruler-centric, male, date-centric and so on. They became narratives of wars, the rise and fall of dynasties and changes of rulers. Chronicles of wars in official texts soon take over the historian. Thousands of pages on war prompt the historian to research and talk about that war. And that becomes the truth that we come to read as History.

Craft of the Historian

How does one look at an archive or a source? How is a document constituted as a document? What is a historical source? These are questions that historians have been looking at, thinking about, problematizing, reflecting on, and

conceptualizing. And immediately, the historian's craft – and History itself – becomes something else. How does this shift take place? We cannot discard the fact that History will be always a mode of knowledge through evidence, archives and documents. But why is it so? Let us chart out some of the arguments.

As we know, everyone rewrites the past, but not always as professional history writing. If I recount my past as a myth – as a story – as fiction and poetry, or jaati itihaas, claiming upper-class status, I operate differently. And what I produce becomes important for historians. But is that narrative of the past the same as the professional narrative of the historian? It is not. And that distinction is important. Both are politics of the self; both are politics of representation of the past. But there is a difference between the professional historian's craft and all other narrations of the past.

Historian's Reflections on the Craft

To talk about this shift, I think we need to talk about two or three different kinds of things. One – what exactly are we really talking about when we talk about the past? Most historians now agree that we can tell different stories of the past. There is no singular past. What we have to discuss is – what does telling different stories of the past mean? Are all stories the same? What does this storytelling involve? That is one question.

Second, the way we look at facts, the meanings are not just embedded within. Even the most radical positivist today will not dispute the fact that there is a process of selection. There are thousands of records in the archives. Everything is not used in the book. So what is the process of selection? What does the selection show us? And how does the historian go about doing it? That specific mode of imbuing meaning to a fact is something we need to reflect on and debate.

So if the past is not unitary, we can tell different stories of the past. Two people could use one set of material and see something the other has not discovered.

If there are different interpretations, what is the process through which meaning comes into History, or narratives of the past are produced? Also, where is the difference between historians' and anyone else's claims to truth? What is the difference between fiction and history?

If that is so, where is the meaning of History? Where does the truth lie? Is it embedded within the facts? If so, everyone would discover the same truth.

If there are different interpretations, what is the process through which meaning comes into History, or narratives of the past are produced? Also, where is the difference between historians' and anyone else's claims to truth? What is the difference between fiction and history?

To answer this, we have to get back to notions of truth, notions of storytelling, notions of fact, notions of archive – all those issues – and how historians today engage with this.

Building the Narrative

Louis Mink, a philosopher who wrote extensively on History, was one of the first to argue that History is a narrative – an act of storytelling. And in History, when you tell a story, the conclusion is not separable from the narrative, unlike in sciences. The act of doing History is one where everything goes together. It is not as if you scan the material, discover all the facts, begin writing the story, and having narrated the facts, draw conclusions and write that these are the facts and these are the conclusions.

Mink argued that in History, the conclusions are the ingredients – that is, they are embedded in the narrative. As you narrate, you make connections. Through the act of narrating the story, events of the past are connected together within

the narrative. Another person could choose different events or make different connections between them. The corpus of archives, evidence etc. are not all historical facts. Therefore writing History becomes an act of continuously generalizing, producing meaning, connecting, and attributing meaning and significance to those facts. So it is always a construction.

Historian's Chronology

The second argument that Mink made very effectively is that there is a chronology – a historical sequence. You can say, how can we debate the chronology? These things happened on these, these dates. Maybe for ancient India, we don't have the exact dates. But subsequently, what can be the dispute over dates? Historians – Mink, Hayden White, Riccœur and many others – argued that chronology itself is something produced by historians. There are many dates; but only some are considered important. That is what structures a narrative and gives meaning to the story. And once that happens, those dates become a part of the narrative.

Different narratives produce different sets of dates. For example, Imperial narratives produced a set of dates very different from that of nationalist narratives. Other narratives – of the Dalits or the marginals or the Samants – produce other dates as significant. Those dates are imbued with significance, and different dates become important.

The other thing is the time frame – historians resort to sequencing when writing a narrative. One thing follows another. And you are making connections. Now that sequence itself is not a sequence that you actually get from the past. The historian's sequence is very different from the sequence as lived by people in the past.

We can fuse time – two hundred years can be fused into one paragraph – or we can amplify time. Le Roy Ladurie, a French Historian, wrote a famous book, Carnival, it is 600 pages for one day in the life of the nation! Through that one day, he explores the politics of the time, popular culture, people's lives, folklore,

folk tradition, battles, wars – everything. And a whole world is opened up.

Micro-history is a major thing now – focusing through a small vent, which may be just an incident within a day; like a three-hour film on the events of one night. You can compress a thousand years into a film. Similarly, historians are condensing and amplifying time, stretching, fusing time. Therefore the sequence and the notion of time are a part of the product of attributing meaning and writing a narrative. This again becomes very important in the writing of History. The historian does not simply discover a pre-existing sequence, or re-narrate a time which has been lived by the people. The lived time is different from the historical time captured by the historian.

A French historian in Russia called Marc Ferro once showed a set of about 60 still shots in one minute – rapid cuts from one shot to another. He showed one sequence in one minute. And in the next minute, the same shots were used, but the sequence was changed. The first minute was the triumphal march of the West – capitalism, democracy, development, modernization, industrialization, everything. The colonial movement was crushed and they took over places. It was a triumphal march of the West. In the second, the sequence was narrated in such a way that it became a triumphal march of colonial movements all over the world. Images of people storming the bastion before they are crushed mean something else. If images of rebellion follow those of people trying to repress, the meaning is changed. So sequencing things defines the meaning of different events. The same shots – the same evidence – tell completely different stories. One is cast in the heroic mood of the West and ratifies the development and progress of the West. The other is a heroic march of the colonial countries – a tragedy for the West. Therefore the same narrative is reworked in completely different ways.

Framing a Narrative

Hayden White, who has written extensively on History, suggested that the framing of the story is important. How is a story framed? In a wonderful book

called Metahistory, he showed how modern history can be written within different kinds of frameworks. The same story can be written in a tragic mode or a heroic or ironic mode. It could be a narrative of a triumphal achievement of a time, or something leading to the tragedy of a nation. For example, Indian independence, for the nationalists, was a triumphant national movement – developing Congress, popular movements uniting, and up to the 40s, a climactic movement which ends in a tragedy acknowledged and written about, but not much focussed upon. For a long period of time, the tragedy of the Partition was talked about, but the focus was on the 70-80 years before that, on that meta-narrative of the nation and the coming into being of the national movement and the State.

Indian independence, for the nationalists, was a triumphant national movement – a climactic movement which ends in a tragedy. For Pakistan, however, the Partition is no tragedy – it is a heroic event which led to the formation of a nation .

That is the triumphal history of the nation, though the Partition was seen as tragic. For Pakistan, however, the Partition is no tragedy – it is a heroic event which led to the formation of a nation . The Partition is never written about in a sad mode in Pakistan. There were deaths; but that sacrifice was part of the making of Pakistan. There are many other examples.

Fiction and History

Hayden White argued that different modes of narration result in different meanings. He concluded that there is no difference between History and fiction. Historians narrate the reality of the past in one way; fiction writers also narrate reality. Both allow us to understand reality. And because they are both narratives, there is not much difference between reality and fiction, and that

separation can be done away with, though perhaps, not entirely. The general thrust of the argument is that we should recognize the similarity between History and fiction rather than as truth opposed to lies. That the fictive and the truth are very often counter-posed was the core of his argument.

This was developed further by a wonderful philosopher called Paul Ricœur who has had a profound influence in social sciences, having written extensively on Philosophy and the social sciences apart from three volumes on History called Time and Narrative. He agreed Hayden White's argument that History is also a figurative act. It is an act of narration where we return to the past and tell a story, and how we tell it matters. But he suggested and emphasized that while we have to see the similarities between fiction and History, we must remember the difference – a difference that needs to be emphasized in talking about the historian's craft.

He argued that unlike the fiction writers, historians inevitably try to understand the past. That past makes a demand for understanding on the present generation and on the historian. Historians owe a debt to that past, in a certain sense. How we understand it is open to debate. But that past is something which has happened. People in the past have lived their lives in particular ways. We need to understand that they had certain customs, norms, culture, practices, economy and society. This understanding defines the relationship between the past and the present, shows how we have emerged, from where, and where we are now. We can locate ourselves in the present only by understanding the heritage of the past. Historians cannot escape the past. Fiction writers, however, are not constrained by a past reality waiting to be discovered. There is here a notion of a past gone by – a past which pre-figures the act of writing History.

He goes on to argue that historians reach back to the past because it always leaves a trace. What is this trace? It can be a document, a visual, an artefact, or anything that allows us to enter the past. A past which leaves no trace is lost to us – in no way can a historian go back to it. And that is the difference between fiction writers and historians. A past without a trace or an imagined futuristic reality can be simulated in fiction. Historians, however, are limited by their craft, which is mode of knowledge by trace. And this trace, in whatever form it exists, is something present in the archive.

Archives

The archive is not just official political documents. Anything which produces knowledge of the past is an archive. It can be oral history, visuals, artefacts, folklore, legends, or anything that says something about the past. We have to develop a complex art of reading those, just as much as we need to read official documents in complex ways. But if these sources do not exist, we have no entry into that past. The more we dig for sources, the more we look for traces of that past. And if we find no trace, we cannot recover the voice.

Say, we want to recover the voice of the marginalized in a particular century. If there is no trace, we only have agendas and programs of discovering them, but cannot discover them. But once we begin to look for traces, we often find archives and sources that we did not imagine as traces. And that leads to an abundance of new sources which are now being seen as legitimate. Positivist historians, even a generation back, would not have considered many traces that we think of as sources today, as valid.

Oral history, never considered earlier, is a valid source, but how we read it is an issue. Even now, senior historians will not consider many things like a legend or folklore, or a tradition or jaati itihaas as valid important sources. But we have to see what they say and what they do not reveal. If we look for facts within them, we may end up finding other things instead of those facts.

A jaati itihaas may not speak of the past of a caste as it actually came into being. But it does say what events and facts a community or caste sees as important in life, never mind if they are concocted events put together in the form of a narrative story. People claiming to be Rajputs may not actually be Rajputs. But ideas, ideologies, sense of self, claims, and the politics of the time are illustrated therein. The jaati itihaas-es clash with each other to reinvent identities. A positivist would say these facts are all wrong – this could not have happened at that time – and therefore they are not historical sources. That is a very limited notion of History. We have to see what these sources and evidence can say and what they cannot say. This is true of all sources.

Everything that the past leaves as a trace has to be discovered, looked at, given meaning to and ultimately organized to tell a story we see as meaningful. In this sense, narratives matter. Facts matter too, once we discover their significance. Archives matter because without referring to them, we cannot talk about the past .

History, being knowledge by trace, is a knowledge embedded in archives and documents – sources in the widest sense of the term. Everything that the past leaves as a trace has to be discovered, looked at, given meaning to and ultimately organized to tell a story we see as meaningful. In this sense, narratives matter. Facts matter too, once we discover their significance. Archives matter because without referring to them, we cannot talk about the past .

We therefore need to differentiate between a lot of writings – Dalit writing, jaati itihaas-es, older myths and legends and tribal stories about their claims to the past. Historians are seriously engaging with them to discover how they make sense of the world. What is important in that world? What is of significance? How do you narrate the story of their origin? The politics of identity, notions of self – everything gets linked up with the stories of the past.

Narratives in Indian History

All this inevitably leads to the question – what is this narrative and how do we create it? For historians and sociologists, this was first questioned, in the history of sciences, by Thomas Kuhn's writing on the notion of paradigm. Positivist history blossomed in the 19th century, when science was triumphant, when to claim any knowledge as true and valid, it had to be scientific. To this day, claims to truth are often made by claiming that it is scientific.

Verifiability as a notion emerges because modern history developed in an era which celebrated science; and science became a paradigm of all knowledge.

Thomas Kuhn and post-Kuhn, we know that even scientists believe that facts within science acquire meaning only within specific paradigms. The knowledge community accepts certain things as true because within the framework they look at, it is constituted as truth. When this comes under question for a prolonged period of time, there will be a period of transition till the new notion of truth is established and accepted by the scientific community.

This displacement of paradigms does not happen in History. In History, there is a battle for paradigms. For example, Imperial histories were questioned by nationalist histories, but they were not completely displaced. Nationalist elite histories are questioned by subalterns but not entirely displaced either. There is always a political battle – for vision, for different ways of relating to the world – to define different relationships to the past and different relationships to society in the present. That battle is part of the battle within History, and it will remain there.

Imperialist Narrative

If you look at Indian history in this context, you see how this battle for paradigms has been fought out and how it is intimately connected to the politics of the present. Early modern history in India was dominated by colonial history writing. The standard texts were Stanley Poole, Vincent Smith and a whole lot of others who were colonial officials writing histories of the time. Preceding these were orientalist narratives promoting a certain notion of the past – chaos, lawlessness, despotism, bad rulers – this was the story about Indians. Then come the British and there is order, law, the railways, industry, agriculture, expansion and growth. And everything is good. The people who played a dominant part within this order are the governor-generals. And entire chapters in textbooks were all about them. So the structure of the book was defined by governor-generals. It was a triumphant story of the British doing good to India – beneficence, modernization, progress, law, order, courts, roads – anything good coming with British rule. And the story remains a part of popular memory because everybody read those textbooks. This was what people were socialized

into. And this produced the premises and the basis of British authority and power in India – the British colonial rulers wrote themselves into history in India, presenting themselves as people saving a poor nation from ruin and destruction, and developing it.

Building of a Nation – A Nationalistic Narrative

That is the heroic story of the benevolent British doing good in India. Obviously, nationalism develops through a critique of this and the argument, at one level, is reversed. Many of the ideas of the British take over the earlier orientalist idea that there was a golden age – a greatness in the past. These have also become a part of the nationalist myths. Liberals in the late 19th century did not believe in the early golden age. They said India was barbaric and savage from the beginning – everything was bad. And the nationalists present British rule as a time of ruin and disaster. Industrialization led to impoverishment and agriculture was ruined. Roads were built; but they took cotton, wheat and other things out of India. There was a drain of wealth, the economy was ruined, we were dominated, subordinated and our culture and notion of self was destroyed.

So, modern history became the story of the birth of a nation. The British had said that India was not really a nation – it was full of conflicting castes, communities and creeds – not even the idea of a nation state existed in the late 19th century. So, writing a nationalist history became vital to the claim of a national movement. The claim then was that there was unity within diversity in India. The different religions understood each other. The different languages and cultures had something common – everyone belonged to the nation. All communities, groups and classes became a part of the national movement which questioned and opposed the British rule which had colonized and impoverished India. And the Congress became the dominant power, leading this heroic battle against colonial power. Gandhi, Nehru and others became the new leaders – the new figures of modern history – where earlier it was Curzon, Lytton and others, who were now the evil villains. So the narrative

became implicated in the national movement and the constitution of the nation, and the affirmation of the nation state after the nation.

But a close look at that frame highlights many erasures – many claims which are not talked about. Focus on the nation does not allow for focussing on inner conflicts. For instance, you never talk about religious conflict. It was even banned from newspaper discussions later – you could say some community against another community, without specifying which. Even now, there are very few books on religion in modern India. Religion is something to do with medieval periods. When you come to modern, it is all a story of reform which becomes part of the story of modern Indian nation state. So religion, caste and region are never talked about. Talking of region is secessionist – you are parochial and regionalistic. All differences had to be erased and unity had to be emphasized. That was the logic, even to the extent of suppression of aspects which did not fit into the narrative.

Many post-colonial historians in the West felt uncomfortable with this. Though not colonialists of the earlier sort, they could not accept this national frame. So they were critical of both old colonialism and the nationalists. Many of them are referred to as the Cambridge school, Australian school and so on. They began to raise very valid questions, though some of their arguments were problematic. They said, what about the region? What about the caste? What about the community? What about religion? These are all important facts you are not talking about. How can you think of politics in India without caste-community-region? India is saturated with it. We know it is a modern state and modern society with modern politics. But how can you ignore all this? So, in a certain sense, they began to again argue and suggest that India was not really a nation. India was a conglomerate of groups, classes and communities. This became part of a post-colonial western negotiation with their selves. They positioned themselves between imperial rule and nationalism and often argued through the language of the former, but in a slightly different way.

Erasures and Broadening Narratives

Nationalism and the national movement is not just Congress. What about other communities and groups?

Once the subaltern studies and other kinds of History began to come in, they looked at other erasures in the nationalist history. They said that nationalism and the national movement is not just Congress. What about other communities and groups? Tribals are mentioned only to the extent that they were important in developing the national movement, those peasants and tribals became important for Gandhi and Nehru. But, what about their lives, their visions, their politics, culture and economies?

In history, everything is male. Women emerge only in a few photographs as participating in processions and so on. But looking at that history, people have discovered how nationalism, while wanting women to participate in the national movement, continuously reaffirmed the idea of women being the protector of the domestic space and being a good wife and mother. Very few nationalist leaders were anti-patriarchal in their thinking. This leads to the question – how do we recover the voices of women? Or how do we recover their lives?

The demand for recovery of the lives of tribals, peasants, workers and marginals led to other kinds of questions – why just them? There are hundreds of other kinds of people. What about their lives? And why shouldn't we know about things which are so important? For instance, if spirit possession or witchcraft is so important in tribal areas, why do we see it as a remnant of a disappearing past? It is not disappearing. It exists and is important in their lives. How do we understand the social movements which are organized around witchcraft and spirit possession, and see how mobilization happens through these? Hardiman came out with the book The Devi Movement, which shows

how even the Congress had to recognize that spirit possession was important and integrate it within the mobilizing process.

Any suggestion about erasures from earlier history suggests a need for broadening the frame and a radical look at all communities and groups who are a part of society. A historian has to be open to the past and the present, and struggle to hear and discover voices which do not always demand attention.

This is all about settled life. What about those who never settled? What about those who are constantly mobile – the vagrants, the pedlars and the pastoralists? We know about the wet rice cultivation or the wheat or the bajra or the jowar; we don't know about the pastoral tracts. Historians have begun to explore this only in the last twenty years. Who lived in the pastoral areas which were taken over? How did they live, what were their lives, their economies, their culture? Now, it is not just the dominant classes or second communities, but the lives of vagrants, beggars, marionettes, the poor, people on the street, prostitutes and spirit people that have opened up.

That is again a framework. Any suggestion about erasures from earlier history suggests a need for broadening the frame and a radical look at all communities and groups who are a part of society. How we can relate to them and do things for them depends on whether we understand them. A dialogue is possible only when you are willing to hear – one of the things historians pose now. Empathy, understanding, and acceptance of those cultures are important. A historian has to be open to the past and the present, and struggle to hear and discover voices which do not always demand attention. This means a search for oral histories, ethnographies, dialogues, discovery of past narratives, fragments, stories, legends and so on. Stories for women's history have been discovered in diaries of people who lived in those times. The battle for opening up of these frames leads to a search for – and hence discovery of – different traces which tell us a little bit about the people.

Conclusion

To end, therefore, with the point that I talked about – how writing a narrative here becomes a way of defining yourself (and) defining your vision of the world. For the colonialists, it was defining their vision of the world; for the nationalists, it was their vision of the world. Those who are doing environmental studies are critiquing earlier things and defining an alternative vision, the gender studies are defining, and those who are keen on discovering other worlds are defining their histories and discovering the histories in order to reconstitute our perception of those people within the world.

This, in a certain sense, becomes a wider, humanist kind of thing where for anything to do with the present, for any understanding to develop between people, across cultures, across societies, across communities, what is necessary is that you begin to listen. You begin to listen, you begin to hear, you search further and you open up your minds to the other. You open up your minds where a dialogue becomes possible. So this dialogue and this project of empathy, I think, is very, very critical for historians. And that opens up our notion of archive, trace, document, etc. in a different way. All those make sense only within this kind of a framework. I'll stop there.

Conversations – Nature, Craft and Teaching of History

On the Craft of Historian

Vishnu: You spoke of historians looking out for voices which are not necessarily wanting to be heard. But there are so many voices in the present time, which may be heard by other people but missed by historians. For example, I might look at a certain marginalized community without necessarily getting into history, or getting into only as much history as is needed for certain interventions. So where is the line drawn between the craft of the historian and someone else who is trying to listen to these voices?

Neeladri: Our objectives may be different – political action, practice or policies – and instead of going back to the past, we may try and understand voices, cultures and worlds in a more limited time frame. If you were to work with artisan communities, with no knowledge of their history, you interview them in a particular way. But if you knew that some of these communities had, for the last hundred years, published newspapers in which they defined their history, thought about their identity, published the origin myths of their community and, through that, expressed what they wanted their world to be and their own internal reforms – an understanding of that would help in relating to that world.

If, in practical activities, we transcend the fear of history, stemming from the notion that History is all about dead facts of the past, and relate to it locally, we discover that one need not read

textbooks to understand History. Local initiatives for understanding cultures, myths, stories and histories are histories in themselves. That is a historical understanding – a part of community history that is being explored worldwide. In India, we lack those kinds of initiatives, though they are important for informing and enriching practical work in some ways and help in understanding the present.

Ganesh: When you use the phrase 'the craft of the historian', what exactly do you mean by the craft? Is it a skill or an art? Or is there a common issue on this?

Neeladri: So, how is it a craft? That is the word I used. But here I would eliminate the distinction between the art and the craft. Craft as a category came up in opposition to art – it was what could not claim to be art, being mere repetition and practice devoid of creativity and originality. It's not simply that we can say it is not craft, it is art. I could talk of it as historian's art. But, I feel that it's not only an a new category that has to be produced, it is a rethinking of the category. Why is craft not creative or original? Why has craft not got innovations?

When it comes to the historian's craft, what are the technical and other constraints and practices? How do we legitimize claims of truth through which we return to the past or relate to the sources? Every source implies specific ways of reading. A source produced by the state will have a certain logic

which will be different from that of a source produced by a community or an individual. Also, what are the internal repressions? What does it

say but not say – or say partly and go on to say something else? Discovering those cracks and fissures is also a part of the craft of a historian.

A historian needs to be sceptical, not simply reproduce the voice of the source and frame a new story based on his/her perception. That implies an act of reading, interpreting and doing things differently from the art of a fiction writer.

Reshmi: You made a differentiation between History and fiction. You said History must remain bounded by the discipline of trace; whereas fiction can go where imagination begins. Later, you said that a historian functions from vision. Does imagination seep into the designing of that vision as well? What is the core difference between writing fiction and writing History, particularly when you are using myths and literature – products of imagination – as reality when you are writing a history?

Neeladri: When I spoke of the difference between the fiction writer and historian, I started by assuming that they shared a lot. A lot of historians of this generation will agree that as soon as we have a narrative, a story or an act of figuration, there is an element of poetry and fiction in everything. It becomes part of an imagination that figures things out. But, for a historian, there is a permanent constraint on that imagination – of the archive and the source – whereas the fiction writer is not under that. So both being narratives, there is a sharing. And the old opposition between fiction and history as truth and lies has to be opposed.

A historian needs to be sceptical, not simply reproduce the voice of the source and frame a new story based on his/her perception. That implies an act of reading, interpreting and doing things differently from the art of a fiction writer.

A new way of refining opposition possibly is necessary – otherwise everything becomes the same. How is my story different from yours? How do I argue that my story is important for me? That is where politics comes in; and it is important to me because it is linked with the vision of the world I've. When I say that (we should) open up our minds to the marginals and so on, you may say I don't want to open up. That's your vision of the world. It's stated in your argument. My politics is possibly to open up to that.

That opening up of the world, that narrative produces a politics and presents it to the world. You need not know my political background – it is there in the text. It's in this sense that a historical text can never be devoid of politics.

Is there some basis on which the historian would choose the facts to be interpreted through the correct mode, so that it is fine History?

On Reading the Archives

Devika: You mentioned that there are myriads of facts from which a historian needs to select some based on their significance and historicity. How would a historian, in his craft – which is all about historical investigation – decide what is important? Is there some basis on which the historian would choose the facts to be interpreted through the correct mode, so that it is fine History?

Neeladri: How do we link things up? What argument do we develop from it? Is there an internal coherence within that? Are there facts which cannot be incorporated within the frame

because they do not appear there? E H Carr said, a long time ago, that when you do not have facts, you go with certain presumptions. Bad history writing happens when one goes to the material looking for certain facts to fit a frame, ignoring all other facts. A good historian also goes with the frame, but with the open-mindedness that the facts can raise questions. Facts which do not correspond are discovered, making one uncertain about one's story. Historians now argue that when something is incomprehensible in the record, you need to pause to see why. Is it because the frame does not allow it? That discloses what lies behind it, and important, interesting facts and events come to light.

Historians therefore have to open their minds to a dialogue with evidence where facts, records and archives speak back and question every assumption that they have. What comes up at the end as the 'good history' is one where that dialogue has been continuous, persistent and dynamic, where frames are questioned and interpreted and the facts resist interpretation.

Usha: If you look at the kinds of materials that are available in the present for future historians or even people who are documenting the present, take something like WikiLeaks. There have been two kinds of viewpoints from historians. Some say it's a wealth of material for historians. But others say you can never actually be definite about anything any more – which has always been the case. So how do you react to the abundance of archival material?

Neeladri: For the last three hundred years, historians have had to deal with immense volumes of evidence because the rise of modernity – from the 18th century – meant the rise of a writing culture, the rise of a recording culture. If you look at the British records, the kinds of records they produced, the amazing detail in them, it's just mind-boggling. The narrative often becomes one of officialdom, bureaucracy, efficient administration and control. But people, their activities and lives come up only sporadically. In that maze, that plethora of records, how does the historian discover people in general – the zamindars, jaagirdaars, local landlords, peasants and others?

Very often, what is done has come to be known as micro-history. You zoom into one story, one point, one event, and see how much of the world you can see by studying it closely. So it is not a global picture, but a dense, rich study of a single event – how far can it tell us more? So you generalize from studies of communities, small localities, and localities within localities. And a whole range of tactics have to be developed to deal with that problem.

Usha: But what we also have now are the social responses to these things. There is a lot more of the people factor now. Whether you look at blogs around an event or official cables or whatever, there is a lot of people-generated material that has nothing to do with official records. So it is much more complicated to sift through what one might want to see as the true story.

Neeladri: Definitely. But here too there are erasures. Some people use the Web; others don't. There are repressions where we think it is open to everyone, but small localities, small places and lots of communities will be outside it. There are lots of histories written with the media as a source. But with the kind of abundance now, how do you cross-check what is evidence? There have to be new affirmations of truth – claims to authenticity. The whole debate around WikiLeaks shows what is sanctioned and legitimate as information and what will not be allowed.

On Interdisciplinarity

To what extent is the discipline of History open to inter-disciplinarity?

Gladwin: I am from an environmental research organization. We are trying to bring various disciplines to bear on the area of environment which, in an inherent sense, is an inter-disciplinary subject. To what extent is the discipline of History open to inter-disciplinarity?

Neeladri: In the 1940s and 50s, French historians began this slogan of 'total history'. And they argued against the divisions between History and other social sciences and humanities. They argued that these divisions were created by academia. A historian operates within a political sphere that is the domain of the ethnographer, the geographer, the sociologist, the anthropologist and the culturalist. All these are divided realms. And they began to bring the disciplines together into what they called Human

Sciences, where there was an effort to totalize History and integrate it into all the social sciences within it. They also went into climate and geography and meteorology and various things. That has come back in a very big way in the last twenty-five years. Historians are not just writing histories of science or medicine, or meteorology, driving the need to interact and work with those who practice those sciences, but are also using anthropology and sociology. The barriers between disciplines have thinned.

But at a certain point, one has to also reaffirm that the focus (of History) still remains. History is read with a certain notion of time, of change, and of a relationship with the past, where ethnography and anthropology are built into the concept of History. The desire to see things as historical products is central to the historian. Everything is historical and their history can be written – whether furniture, clothing, food or architecture. We can pose historical questions relating to their emergence, their nature at different points of time and so on. Utilizing different insights into History is different from dissolving the differences altogether.

On Nature of History

Rohit: You mentioned that the difference between fiction and history is that history is bound by the traces available in the present, through which you go to the past. That can distinguish history writing from fiction but doesn't give it enough firmness to

avoid complete relativism. So what is it that helps avoid complete relativism?

Secondly, rather than emphasizing on the lives of kings and nobles or decision-making in the state, I would emphasize the lives of my people, of women and of tribals. Tribal life is definitely important enough, to be accounted for. But I can use the same tools and validation processes of knowledge formation as that of the state and the lives of kings and nobles. Therefore this is not really a different knowledge formation paradigm. It might simply be a shift in emphasis.

Neeladri: In the case of History, we need to first define what this relativism is all about. And there, the question of politics becomes very important – the question of what a narrative opens up. What is the kind of vision it affirms, projects and makes us believe? And if we think of the past and present through that, what is the kind of social political world that we will believe in? If we think in this frame, some of the problem of relativism is overcome, because it becomes a false problem.

The problem in History is not choosing whether something is true or false, because that is the typical relativism. And every truth goes. If, instead, you suggest that there are competing paradigms and therefore competing truths within their claims, and if you believe in that, then you actually affirm that politics. For example, one could talk of the colonial frame. Not all that they said was false, but it was the way they narrated their claims. They did build roads and schools; they did introduce new laws and codes;

industries did grow. Maybe 10-20 per cent of the facts can be disputed. But the truth in those facts is not what matters so much. It is what meaning you give to those facts, how you narrate them and what the overall story is. That matters. What makes it colonial is the style of narrative whereby Indians, Indian society, culture and practices are demeaned and imperial, colonial British power, authority, intervention and mediation are celebrated.

So it is not a true-false dichotomy. It is not one universal claim to truth that we talk about; but how that truth is read. How does one constitute truth and meaning within the narrative? There it becomes a question of critiques, proofs and refutations. The notion and knowledge there is not by dismissing something necessarily, but by critiquing and demonstrating what we have, by arguing what can be brought in, and by showing how alternative visions of the world can be opened up.

As long as we recognize that it is the politics of frame which is involved, we should not be too anxious about the question of truth and falsehood. The colonialists were not telling lies; they were being colonial.

It is not a kind of democratization where you shift from royalty and dominant classes to these people. But erasure implies that those who are erased need to be brought back into history. The world we live in is peopled by various social groups and communities – a product of interaction between different ways of living, being and defining the world – and we have to study all of these. So as long as we recognize that it is the politics of frame which is involved, we should not be too anxious about the question of truth and falsehood. The colonialists were not telling lies; they were being colonial.

This means that the question of truth has to be re-posed. You may not agree with their perspectives because you have your own. But they conform to the historian's craft; and therefore it is not a question of lie and truth.

Rohit: It sounds like, for my vision of the world and the kind of world it opens to me, history is just a tool. The past is irretrievably lost and we reconstruct it to reaffirm the kind of world we want to open. The question was not about truth and falsehood. Is there something which helps decide what makes fine history – that these are the procedures, norms and ways that are respected and held to make some sense?

Neeladri: I would pose the other question – what is this past which is irretrievably lost? And how do you frame it, keeping your subjectivities out? Refusing to recognize that every time you return to the past to recover it, your subjectivity is involved is a myth. You cannot see the world outside without a frame or a reference or a grid, or a lens or a spectacle.

There are histories which are conscious manipulation, whether they are fascist, communal, despotic, Stalinist, or whatever. They are obviously poor histories at one level. But there can be good histories within other kinds of frames which I disagree with, which I see as actually producing very interesting, powerful persuasive narrative, but opening it up in a way that I find problematic. Every text produced has an internal narrative 'politics' in the wider sense. That politics is not instrumental.

The first minimal level of distinction of good history is, when a claim is made, whether it is actually based on existing sources. But what becomes more important is, how do you interpret the source when you get to it – whether it is a visual, oral history or official documents?

What becomes more important is, how do you interpret the source when you get to it – whether it is a visual, oral history or official documents?

The technique of good history writing is being conscious of the fact that there are certain limits to interpretation within the document – you cannot escape that. So what are the limits of our interpretation? What do the sources allow us to tell and not tell? And that will be common to all – from the Left to the Right, from the conservative to the progressive, from the democrat to the authoritarian – in any form of history writing.

Then there are ways of looking. If we try to understand the history of the Bhils from an oral legend, the narrated events may not really be Bhil experiences. But they do indicate how the Bhils perceive themselves and their history, and what they value over others. For instance, they value a life of staying in the mountains and raiding as a valid mode of living over a sedentary life based on settled agriculture. They show us what Bhil culture is about, without each event of a raid being valid. Once you talk about what they value, celebrate and affirm through the narrative, it is as determinate as any other event.

So you can draw out a lot. But you cannot draw out certain things. That is where the craft of the historian demands that you look at the sources, see what can be said and what cannot be said, and how

far interpretation is plausible within them. The more you conform to that mode, it becomes the accepted frame (of History) within which there can be debates and discussions about perceptions.

On Competing Frameworks

Suhel: You mentioned induction as a way of generalizing about the world. Is there any tradition in History, as in the sciences, of deduction where you have competing models of the way the world works – or has worked, in the case of History – from which you make predictions about what evidence you should find? For example, if the colonial version of History was correct, then various social indicators were very low before the British arrived, and went up after they arrived. And if the nationalist version is correct, then we should find the opposite. So is there that kind of tradition as well?

Neeladri: It is an issue which at one level appears easily demonstrable through figures. There is detailed data on productivity, on wheat, jowar, bajra, cotton and what has happened, and detailed data on different kinds of soils etc. Early data is less reliable than later data, being collected impressionistically rather than rigorously. In many places, there are certain regions which are reliable and other regions which are not. Very often, in recording it, there is a politics of that economy. Sometimes the patwari himself – and more so, the person in charge of the revenue survey – is actually interested in overstating the actual amount of produce because by doing

so, the revenue charged can be higher. So how do you find that the details are overstated? By cross-checking the aggregate studies with a series of micro studies. A more detailed field-to-field survey shows that in each place, they overstate by 30 or 40 per cent. Later, when the nationalist movement happens, the same officers try to show revenue as very low.

One pioneering study shows that there was a decline, or stagnation. But there is a difference. In agriculture, for instance, in Punjab, Maharashtra and Madras there is growth; in Bengal, Orissa and Bihar, there is decline. In wheat and cotton, there is a growth; in jowar and bajra, there is decline. So in things that are sold in the market, there is a growth.

You can make very broad generalizations that these things are happening. Therefore it is not as if nothing can be done. You have to look at the data; you have to see very carefully. Unless cross-checked with micro data, qualitative evidence, what appears plausible, and others, it cannot offer a definitive argument.

On Teaching History

Venu: You say that it is not possible to do History without bringing in the subject – the historian and the people written about. In that sense, History becomes deeply psychological. There seem to be some implications for teaching and learning History. If traditionally, the caricature of teaching

and learning History is considered boring, now there is a danger that it becomes too difficult. Unless the student and the teacher are highly self-aware and self-conscious historians and understand how they are placed in the process of discovering and learning History, true historical exploration can't happen. What is your response to that?

Neeladri: Is this making teaching more complicated? Yes and no. If you take the text as the final word about the past, as the truth, rote-learning will follow from that frame.

Whether it makes it more psychological, I am not certain. What it does is to bring the subjectivity of the people who have produced it – all that becomes important in reading and knowing about History. I think that is true and I am emphasizing that. And I don't think you can get away from it. In fact, by acknowledging that, I am making it a part of teaching, I think it doesn't make it more difficult – it makes the teaching more exciting. We have done it in a way in the NCERT textbooks. Eklavya has been doing it for many, many years now. The sources and material are part of your text, and part of the material that teachers ought to have access to, where a student looks at it and begins to interpret it.

The problem is that even when we produce texts, teachers may not transact it in that way. That is not because it is more difficult, but because people still have a different notion of what a text should be. It should be definitive about what the truth is. If it is not, there is a problem. But it is being done worldwide and beginning to be done here, and it will take some time.

Sriparna: As a teacher wanting to inculcate some things like creative multiple perspectives, I face the problem that there are so many eminent sources of History available, representing multiple perspectives, but very little of Indian context. So it is time to bring up Indian sources and make them accessible for teachers. Otherwise, how does one get access to it?

Neeladri: In India, not much has been done about making material available for teachers so that they have resources to fall back on to teach creatively. Teachers did not have to look at other sources and inquire. That happens only if you believe in a different mode of developing knowledge, a different pedagogy, or a different notion of History. They gradually come together now.

Sources have become important – giving sources to students and the teachers so that they can begin to ask historical questions. It is being done not only in the advanced West, but all over the world. . Here that tradition has not yet happened. Lots of institutions and peoples and groups have to get together and create this new awareness. One hopes this is something that happens over time.

Here, sources have become important – giving sources to students and the teachers so that they can begin to ask historical questions. It is being done not only in the advanced West, but all over the world. South African history and the materials they produce are amazingly interesting and exciting. In England, the teachers' movement has had a journal Teaching History, for many years. All the institutions produce material and put it up on the Web. From the BBC to the British Library, all produce material for teaching. In America and Europe, it is seen as a part of institutions to produce teaching material. Here that tradition has not yet happened. Lots of institutions and peoples and groups have to get together and create this new awareness. One hopes this is something that happens over time.

Mainstream Indian History and the Dalit Perspective

Prof. Kancha Ilaiah

Kancha Ilaiah the Chairman of the Political Science Department at Osmania University, a social activist and author. He is a major figure in the ideological movement against the Indian caste system.

Mainstream Indian History and the Dalit Perspective

Prof. Kancha Ilaiah

About this mainstream and marginal standpoint in history writing, let me, at the very outset, say that I am not a historian by training at all. Nor do I belong to the traditional, well-trained – and more particularly, western-trained – school of Political Scientists. I am basically a teacher cum activist who has taken up writing.

But in all these phases, one major thing that was missing was the existence of the lives and histories of the productive communities of the nation itself – the tribals, the Dalits and the OBCs who are a part of the larger Sudra communities.

Though I had the background of the radical Marxist movement experience in Andhra Pradesh, I gradually shifted to the Dalit-Bahujan ideological thinking from the mid-80s onwards. So whatever I say here or whatever I write has something to do with my background – coming from a rural, OBC, first-generation education in the regional medium, shifting to English in college and then struggling to learn the kind of knowledge that I learnt. And the points I make are not based on my concrete collection of data, but on my own reading of History, my own reading of rural society, and my own understanding of the politics of teaching of History in education.

Teaching of History in schools has passed through several phases – the early post-independence phase, the medieval post-independence phase and the reactionary independent phase of the BJP period – the NCERT rewriting of books phase – and then the later retrieval kind of a phase. But in all these phases, one major thing that was missing was the existence of the lives and histories of the productive communities of the nation itself – the tribals, the Dalits and the OBCs who are a part of the larger Sudra communities. Each state has a category construction of its own OBC group; but there is a larger – debatable – national paradigm, which is also coupled with the question of communalism and secularism. Today we call it the Dalit-Bahujan perspective of History. Many historians agree with it and many don't; and some of

them take it as something very marginal and not to be taken seriously.But it is part of a larger movement, and if this perspective is not taken seriously, neither the question of Dalit-Bahujan ideological confrontation with the nation, nor the question of minorities becoming part of the nation would take place. So, in a way, there is a need to re-look at this question.

Political Thought in Indian History

For many years, ancient India used to be taught from the point of view of the Vedic concept of dharma – Ramayan, Mahabharat, Kautilya's Arthashaastra and Manu Dharma. And all of it used to be taught as positive – great past - and there was no mention of the varna system at all, anywhere in the teaching. Nowhere was there a mention of Buddha as a political thinker. Kautilya figured hugely; Manu figured as positive. But no Buddhist political school figured among them. It was only in the mid-80s, when there was a conflict with the communist school of thought and the Dalit school of thought that Buddha began to figure massively.

Gautam Buddha's political thought was far more substantial than that of Kautilya and Manu, especially on the question of the notion of dhamma as a notion of justice. Because the notion of dharma in Hindu thought was essentially varna dharma. Without varna dharma, one could not think of dharma at all. But dhamma was opposed to that. It was more or less equivalent to what was Socrates' concept of justice, or later, Platonic – and much more than that.

So how do you teach Ancient India to children? Do you teach it as Vedic, Ramayan-ic, Mahabharat-ic – or Buddhist/Jain – because Buddhism, as a political system also, ruled India for a thousand years and more? But to my knowledge, the most predominant source of nationalism in all writings and all schools are the Vedic texts, Ramayana, Mahabharat and more so, the Bhagvad Geeta because Gandhi used that book as a political text.

Buddhist India does not feature much in contemporary History teaching in the form that it should have – the difference between the question of consumption and production. The Buddhist source was a productive Seminic source of life, and the Brahminic source was oppositional to the production and more consumption-based. Even on the question of violence and non-violence, the resources for non-violence

are drawn primarily from Hindu religious texts. But are these non-violent texts?

The first historian who wrote about the larger Indian society, was Alberuni. That was in the late 10th – early 11th century. Alberuni's Al-Hind talks about all kinds of things in India, including the rural masses, their culture, their behaviour and so on. How much analysis on Alberuni has taken place?

Then comes the North-South divide. There is a lot that has gone into school education about Adi Shankara and the whole question of Shaivism and the Vedantic thought. It was accepted by the Left, it was accepted by the Right – it was accepted by everybody. But how much of Basava figured in the school education?

Basava was also a Brahmin. At the age of eight, he opposed his father initiating him into upanayana because his older sister was not given a sacred thread too. When he was told it was not meant for women, he asked why it was not given to some other boys in the locality. He was told they were Sudras and could not wear one. Incensed at this, he walked out of the house and founded the Veerashaiva cult to propagate the philosophy of equality.

Now how does a thinker like Shankara, who preached caste quite substantially, opposed Buddhism, and was responsible for annihilating thousands of Buddhist monks become a positive thinker of nationalism, and not Basava?

Then we come to the Muslim rulers' period and we come to the nationalist construction of History. Modern history has been written in different ways. But the question is – if Bhagvad Geeta became the central source of nationalism, why is it that the Quran was not seen as a source of nationalism in India? Did Quran not inspire nationalism at all, in spite of being a 'touchable' and more widely read book?

Also, did the Bible in India inspire nationalism or not? Christianity was here in India right from St Thomas' days – it did not inspire nationalism?

Teaching History

If you go tell students that the nationalist inspiration came from the Bhagvad Geeta, Quran and Bible, can you cut the roots of communalism? This is a question that really bothers me. If you don't validate those spiritual texts in their own right – in their own sense – how can you demolish the structures of communalism? The point is that today's classrooms are not one-caste classrooms. Thanks to the Supreme Court judgement upholding the RTE, 25 per cent poor children should now be admitted by the richest of rich schools.

So in this context, when the classroom is a collective of Dalit-Bahujan, tribal, minority, Muslim, Christian, etc, does your silence about the caste system work in the classroom? The classroom is a collection of castes and cultures. Do you talk about it or not – and if you do, how? Do you talk about it as a good Indian heritage system that came into being, that exists today, and continues tomorrow? Or do you say that this is absolutely bad and we need to abolish it? The Marxist school and the Dalit-Bahujan school have taken a view, even in the classroom, that class needs to be abolished. But will that necessarily lead to equal opportunities for all?

How much is taught about Mahatma Phule who initiated a different kind of egalitarian renaissance?

In teaching Renaissance as a part of our History, it all begins and ends with Raja Ram Mohun Roy, who is known in every school in India. How much is taught about Mahatma Phule who initiated a different kind of egalitarian renaissance? Did Phule not write? And does Savitribai Phule exist as the first woman teacher of this country? How do we take these people into schools?

We teach Gandhi as a nationalist hero. But how much is taught to school children about Ambedkar? My contention is, if you are teaching Gandhi, Ambedkar should figure more substantially because he is a great writer, a great historian, and a great economist. We have not examined his writing.

Production and Dignity of Labour

One major point I would like to raise is – do you teach about people belonging to different castes as people of production? You could teach a class where there is a Brahmin child, a Dalit child and a dhobi's child that shoe-making is a part of the industrial process – converting skin into leather and leather into commodities – and taking the commodity into the market. They need to be reminded that the final product is a respected commodity. Children can also be taught that washing clothes is not polluting, but rather, a source of cleanliness.

Barbers' children who worry about their parents shaving clients and doing 'dirty work' can be told that barbering involves enormous skills, and the barbers were the early doctors – they were the first surgeons – in India. It is on record that even plastic surgery and other surgical procedures were done by barbers. On a lighter note, most Hindu gods are depicted as clean-shaven. Who shaved them? The barber. If the barber shaves them, then why not the barber also emerge as a dignified human being in the realm of spirituality? Or take pot-making, for instance. What is pot-making? If the pot is a source of history, how does it figure in the classroom?

So my point is that teaching dignity of labour has to go into Indian schools enormously.

So my point is that teaching dignity of labour has to go into Indian schools enormously. This is one area on which we have not focussed at all. A lot of rural productive history has not been written. History writing so far is based on footnote-writing. But there is no footnote for that work at all. A village has a history of present and past. There needs to be lots of writing about it.

I once interviewed an old chamar man when I went to see an iron smelting act. A barber's knife had emerged as the sharpest knife in India by the time of the Jains, because the Jains – and the Buddhists – had clean-shaven heads. But to have a very sharp, advanced iron blade, there needs to be an advanced iron smithy. And to have a controlled iron smithy, you need to have leather sacs to blow in the air. Such leather sacs of ancient character exist in the villages even now.

Unfortunately we don't have museums of productive instruments.

So in order to melt the ore, they designed the leather blowpipe for the smithy. It was an advanced instrument, the making of which involved an essential principle of physics – that empty space sucks in air. The earliest blowpipe consisted of a round-ish leather sac with its tail end extending into the hearth, providing a constant supply of air from the atmosphere, so that the high smelting temperature could be maintained.

A major design breakthrough happened when a small hole was cut on the underside of the sac and a leather valve stitched from inside. When the sac is pressed from outside, it lifts the valve up and air gushes in. This air is then pushed into the hearth once the valve closes. This technique ensures a constant and controlled flow of air. My informant told me that the working of the valve was something they learnt from observing the operation of heart valves of cattle they had slaughtered. Understanding such complex mechanism several centuries back enabled the process of pushing primitive science to post-primitive stages.

If you were to tell Dalit, Chamar or Madiga children, who are even more untouchable than other Dalits, that their ancestors stitched these valves and possessed great scientific knowledge, how much pride they would carry with them! And the upper-caste children would also realize that they are good human beings. This is the kind of knowledge we need to take into the classroom.

Therefore, teaching dignity of labour, the history of production and the history of productive science becomes very important. I have been criticized for classifying land-tilling, iron-smithing, pot-making, etc as science. But my point is – somewhere we need to redefine existing concepts.

Caste and Conflict

One of the major problems that we have is the kind of symptoms of civil war, based on a war of nerves. That exists in villages, and even in colleges and universities, between the Dalit-Bahujans and the upper-caste students and also other layers of society. The conflict zones are going to increase in future – one on caste lines, village-to-village and college-to-college. The tension is too much in certain areas; and it is going to increase from the religious point of view.

School education is the key to change this course of the nation, And the textbook is central from Class One onwards, or even kindergarten. These things cannot be settled in questions and answers. We should look at what kinds of books were written, both for school education and for nationalism, for the graduation books and the post-graduation books – and PhD theses. So we have to go through a long range. .

The point is that we need to re-examine our own position. This is our problem. But my question to a general historian is – what do you teach me? Do you problematize the existing writing of History or not? The whole construction of Hindu nationalism emerges out of the orientalists' translations and writing of History.

An Inclusive Classroom

We cannot avoid the caste discourse. But we could bring it to a different ideological framework, that is, occupation cum dignity.

How do we evolve an inclusive classroom? There, instead of talking about the history of caste in the form that came to us – if you directly deal with the question of labour and dignity of labour, which is a history in itself, then all caste-background children will have to engage with that in a secular mode. That, to me, needs to be done with a very categorical understanding of de-casteizing the mind. We cannot avoid the caste discourse. But we could bring it to a different ideological framework, that is, occupation cum dignity. My point is that we need to re-look at the whole nationalist historiography.

There is a need for more engagement with the history of production and bringing that into the classroom. After all, the classroom uses a lot of symbols. If you ask children to write an essay on the cow, you give full marks if somebody says the cow, its dung and its urine is sacred. If instead, one writes that the cow is an animal that produces a bull to till the land for food, its skin becomes leather and its bones become coal, it is termed a bad essay. This is the classroom and its mindset – the mind of History also.

So let us assume that caste can be mentioned and it should just become an issue of work and ethics – not History at all. What is wrong if you say that I am a Brahmin and I am a Kuduba, and we just treat it like that? Children should be able to mention their caste, their background, like any other name, and go out with respect, dignity and equality.

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The Gender Narrative — Lives and Voices of Women in History

Prof. Kumkum Roy

- *Why talk about Men and Women*
- *Hurdles in our path*
- *Changing the Chart*
- *Case Study*

The Gender Narrative — Lives and Voices of Women in History

Prof. Kumkum Roy

In the 1970s, there was a cartoon that did the rounds (in prehistoric times, when there was no internet). It showed a little girl, frowning as she examined a blackboard which had a typical chronological chart –STONE AGE MAN, BRONZE AGE MAN, IRON AGE MAN… were there no women then, she mused. Nearly forty years later, that simple question is only partly answered.

Why talk about Women and Men?

This is often a troubling question in pedagogical practice. More often than not, especially in private schools, teachers are women, middle/upper class, upper caste, and by and large from the majority community—the profession, especially in the Social Sciences and Humanities, has been steadily feminized over the last few decades. The reasons for this, interesting in themselves, need not detain us here. But its implications are worth considering. Teachers have a dominant presence in the classroom scenario. At the same time, there is administrative supervision, parental interventions, anxieties, if not interference, and young, growing children, often both girls and boys, who can be interested, bored, defiant. This is not an easy space to inhabit, and small wonder that teachers (we are human after all) choose to turn a blind eye to themes that are potentially explosive. In this context gender, with its undercurrent of sexuality, tends to be viewed as a topic that is handled by reducing it to sanitized platitudes—'we must treat men and women equally' rather than as a challenging theme to be engaged with.

If we do not discuss gender (within history and other disciplines), we are in effect erasing the experiences of what should have been (but in a situation of sex selective abortions, isn't) 50% of the population.

And yet, if we do not discuss gender (within history and other disciplines), we are in effect erasing the experiences of what should have been (but in a situation of sex selective abortions, isn't) 50% of the population. That, as is obvious, is not conducive to any attempt to work towards an inclusive education.

Consider some of the themes for which histories are just beginning to be written in order to address this imbalance. Women have, in most historical situations, been involved in domestic labour, within their own households as well as in those of others. Domestic labour has so many components—cooking, cleaning, caring, to name a few. And yet, archaeologists and historians are still groping towards working out a history of food processing (a more high sounding and perhaps comprehensive term than cooking), trying to document how techniques of boiling, drying, steaming, frying, baking, preserving foods were discovered, transmitted and evolved. These are all processes that we take for granted; indeed, our survival rests on them, and yet, they have not been considered as 'proper' subjects of historical/archaeological studies till recently.

Child rearing, likewise, is something that is taken for granted as something that happens almost naturally or automatically. Yet, historical investigations (and indeed this is something we can see around us) suggest that child rearing practices have varied through time and space. Recovering these histories, and making them available to learners is obviously a pressing need.

Adolescents (and they are not alone) are preoccupied if not obsessed with issues of sexuality. One way of addressing this is to discuss the complex histories of sexual practices—once again giving a sense of the diversities that have existed in the past, so that the present moment can be contextualized beyond its immediacy.

All these issues, as well as others that we may think of, have the potential of breaking one of the major stereotypes that many of us operate with, either consciously or

subconsciously—that the categories of men and women are biological givens, and that these givens then determine our lives almost inexorably. We can consider strategies of communicating this to our learners. There are (to put it somewhat simply) two possible positions we may wish to adopt (we can even think of combining them).
One is to point out that while there are biological differences, these need not form the basis of social differences. For instance, skin colour should not be the basis for discrimination, or one need not become the prime minister simply because one is tall.

The other, more complicated, argument is that we are constantly in the process of shaping our identities—so, we and those around juggle with various possibilities of projecting ourselves as men and women, and that the ways in which men and women are identified/ identify themselves, is something that changes over time.

To cite a somewhat commonsensical example of this: in one spectacular find of skeletons from a Harappan site, the skeleton was identified as a woman because it had bangles on the lower arm. As some skeptical archaeologists pointed out, this was done on the assumption that the Harappans followed present-day practices. It is useful to remind ourselves that markers of gender identity, like so much else, vary in different situations, and both men and women occasionally transgress, and deliberately adopt symbols that are associated with the opposite sex.

Hurdles in Our Paths

While all of this may sound essential, interesting and even exciting, we need to take into account that it is not particularly simple. Apart from the context of the classroom, there are other problems as well. The first is that while there has been a considerable amount of historical research on questions of gender, much of this has still not found its way into undergraduate/ post-graduate courses in different parts of the country. As such, to expect teachers to be familiar with the findings of specialized research is not particularly fair.

Second, we still do not have enough research on themes such as a history of domestic labour, even though we may recognize its importance. Some scholars argue that we may never find the sources to reconstruct such histories. Others would consider it not worth the effort.

Third is what we may call the problem of 'fit.' Where do we fit or accommodate histories of gender relations, or even histories of women, within our existing frameworks? Most of us are familiar with the fact that colonial historians, notably and notoriously James Mill, divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. That division was based on an understanding of the religious beliefs of rulers as being the most significant criterion for marking historical change. We have since moved on towards trying to focus on economic criteria, or even socio-economic criteria, but none of these chronologies around which we organize historical knowledge take into account transformations in gender relations. So, what we find then is an attempt to squeeze in histories of gender within the existing chronological frames, even though it does not necessarily work—it is not as if the ways in which domestic labour is organized, to cite just one example—will change the moment the ruling dynasty is overthrown. Nor, is it likely that economic changes such as the growth or decline in trade will automatically impact on child rearing practices. So, creating a viable space for alternative histories that need not necessarily fit into existing frameworks remains a challenge.

Changing the Chart

And yet, the picture is not entirely one of doom and despair. Feminist historians have been working to develop tools of analysis and conceptual categories to make sense of and intervene within the discipline. One major breakthrough has been in our understanding of the concept of patriarchy. Literally meaning the rule of the father, it has become a shorthand term to understand the ways in which male domination operates and is institutionalized in different contexts. Historians have been able to understand how patriarchies change over time—they vary in terms of region, caste, class and community, how women may resist patriarchal institutions and practices, but may also consent to many of these, and may even be complicit in enforcing patriarchal norms. This has helped in making sense of the complexities, compromises and conflicts that go into the making of everyday histories even if not grand events. And, it is worth remembering that for most of us, ordinary mortals, it is the everyday that is significant. Second, historians have also been devising strategies to handle the lack or even absence of sources. Archaeologists, for instance, are now working on ways to recover evidence from material remains that allow them to reconstruct practices within household spaces. They are able to suggest which areas were used for production, cooking,

sleeping, etc. And they attempt to work out the implications of such allocations of space in terms of gender relations.

Historians working with texts, likewise, have begun to read these far more carefully. If there are statements about gender relations should we take them at face value? Or are there other ways of interpreting these? For example, if the Manusmrti says: 'where women are worshipped there the gods rejoice', does that indicate a high status for all women? Or is it meant only for women who were part of the brahmanical world? And for them, was it meant only for those who stayed within the walls of the household and observed all the norms of subservience that were laid down for them?

We need to work towards bridging the gulf between so-called experts and teachers, to set up a dialogue so that classroom experiences, questions and transactions can inform research. We also need to evolve modes of communication that allow for an easy, accessible sharing of research findings.

We can then, try and handle the existing situation in a variety of ways if we think it is necessary to work towards engendering history. We need to work towards bridging the gulf between so-called experts and teachers, to set up a dialogue so that classroom experiences, questions and transactions can inform research. We also need to evolve modes of communication that allow for an easy, accessible sharing of research findings, and we need to create the space for a continuous engagement with questions of gender, and resist the temptation to convert "women" into one more topic in the syllabus, to be dealt with summarily, and then to be forgotten once again.

Understanding the French Revolution – A case study

Let us see how some of these possibilities can actually be transacted in the classroom. For the present, let us focus on one chapter from the Class IX history textbook, published by the NCERT, titled the French Revolution. (The NCERT text books are available in text book stores as well as for free download at the NCERT website – www.ncert.nic.in). The French Revolution marks a landmark in human

history, because its slogan of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity served as an inspiration for democratic movements in the decades and centuries that followed, even if the revolution itself did not live up to the expectations of all those who had participated in it.

Those who worked on the chapter, which consists of six sections, made a conscious attempt to engender the chapter.

The sectional heads are as follows:

- French Society During the Late Eighteenth Century
- The Outbreak of the Revolution
- France Abolishes Monarchy and Becomes a Republic
- Did Women have a Revolution?
- The Abolition of Slavery
- The Revolution and Everyday Life

The text allows for two pedagogical strategies—one, of tracking and highlighting women as participating in and responding to the revolution through its different phases, and second, of focusing on them only in the context of a specific section.

The very first paragraph (p.3) mentions the fact that about 7000 men and women took to the streets of Paris and organized themselves into a people's militia on 14th July, 1789. In the hands of a gender-sensitive teacher, we can make use of this strategy to trace out the presence of women as a running strand throughout the text. If we are gender-blind, however, it is likely that we will talk about women only when we come to section 4. What we can see is that the text allows for two pedagogical strategies—one, of tracking and highlighting women as participating in and responding to the revolution through its different phases, and second, of focusing on them only in the context of a specific section. Ideally, if we could make use of both these pedagogical strategies/ spaces, it would enrich the way the chapter is transacted and sensitize the

learners to the possibility of asking questions about gender in other situations as well, even though we may not have the answers as yet!

Women and Violence

Further, on (p.7), we find a box containing excerpts from eyewitnesses who lived / traveled through France before the outbreak of the revolution. One of them, Arthur Young, who noted the sharp social and economic disparities that marked French society, observed: "And he who chooses to dine to the accompaniment of his victims' groans, should not complain if during a riot his daughter gets kidnapped or his son's throat is slit."

Once again, a gender-sensitive teacher has an opportunity here—to pick up the statement and open it up for discussion on the ways in which large-scale violence often impacts differently on women and men.

If this instance focuses on what could have happened to women and men belonging to the nobility, other parts of the text draw attention to ordinary women.

At the same time, women who participated in the revolution also took part in apparently violent acts. For instance, we learn (p.9) that part of the crisis that precipitated the French Revolution was because of an acute shortage of food — and women, after waiting in queues for hours, stormed the bakeries to get bread. Examples such as these allow the learner and the teacher to investigate questions of which women would have been involved in these acts and why.

Besides, the first phase of the revolution was followed by warfare—both within the country and outside. This, interestingly, created certain opportunities for women (p.14)—they found themselves in charge of household matters, and were also able to set up their own clubs or associations to press for their political demands.

The Revolutionary Response to Women

If women were active participants in the revolution and responded to its different phases, what was the impact of the revolution on them?

Consider, for instance, the vignette (p.8) where the king convened an assembly of the three estates (the three recognized divisions in French society in the 18th century). Here, the first two estates, consisting of the clergy (representatives of the church, amongst the largest landowners) and the nobility, were expected to sit, whereas those who represented the third estate (including professionals, traders, shopkeepers and wealthy landowners) were expected to stand. What is more, peasants, artisans and women were denied entry, although they had filed several thousands of petitions listing their grievances. Once again, we can pick up the thread of the ways in which women (and others) were excluded and highlight it for our learners.

In a sense, this symbolic exclusion became real as the Revolution progressed. When a Constitution was put in place in 1791 (p.10, Fig 7), women, children, and men below the age of 25 were designated as passive citizens, with no voting rights. The grounds for inclusion and exclusion (men with property were given greater rights than those without) can be fruitfully opened up for lively discussions.

At the same time, gestures were made towards the notion of equality. We note (p.16) that terms like Monsieur and Madame were replaced by citoyen (m) and citoyenne (f) implying a degree of equality amongst all those who were designated as citizens.

Schooling became compulsory for girls. Women could no longer be forced into marriage by fathers. Marriage itself was now regarded as a civil contract. Divorce was legalized and could be applied for by both men and women . However, the right to vote was realized only in 1946.

Also, there were some major improvements that were attempted—schooling became compulsory for girls. Women could no longer be forced into marriage by fathers. Marriage itself was now regarded as a civil contract. Divorce was legalized and could be applied for by both men and women (p.19). However, the right to vote was realized only in 1946.

Responses: Representations by and of Women

How did women respond to the situation? We have interesting material (p.15) including a visual of liberty, conceptualized as a woman, the creation of a woman artist. Clearly, the turmoil of the revolution created opportunities for women to train as artists and display their work. The visual allows us to see how the artist used the revolutionary symbols—the three colours of the flag of the French Republic—red, white and blue. She also shows the woman holding two things—a sheaf of paper symbolic of the Declaration of Rights and a cap. The cap was symbolic of liberty. However, women were not allowed to wear it. It is interesting to see how the artist both sticks to this provision and attempts to break away from it by creating the figure of liberty who holds the cap of freedom high in her left hand. Analysing such images then helps us open up questions of how gender relations/ identities can be negotiated if not transformed.

Another interesting visual (Fig.12, p.18) depicts less exalted women in action. This anonymous print shows ordinary women dressed in the colours of the revolution—red, white and blue, carrying as their weapons tools of daily use—rakes, axes, hoes, and holding aloft a standard with the sign of justice—the scales – and the cap symbolic of liberty. It is evidently a representation of the women whose lives are described in the text—working for a living, and carrying the burden of household work as well.

These women organized themselves into clubs, and put forward demands for equal rights. One of the women leaders, Olympe de Gouge, made an impassioned and reasoned plea for equality (p.20) stating "Woman is born free and remains equal to man in rights." However, many revolutionary men, such as Chaumette (p.20) thought that the difference between men and women was natural and insisted that they be maintained. Ultimately, most of the women's political associations were closed down, and women such as Olympe de Gouge were executed.

Once we engender the French Revolution, then, our understanding of it becomes more complex. It is no longer simply the starting point of present-day democracies. It also represents a time when ordinary women actively participated in revolutionary activity, some of their hopes and dreams were met, many remained unfulfilled. It leaves us with a richer, perhaps even disturbing understanding of historical processes and their impact, and can shape our own interventions in the world around us in a variety of ways.

Interpreting Oral Literature

CN Subramanian

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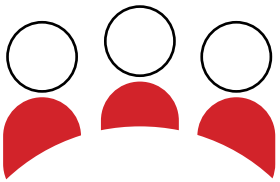

Interpreting Oral Literature

CN Subramanian, Eklavya

For the last two days, we have been debating and thinking. Now we will read some texts and then talk around that.

Introduction to the text

This is a text which comes from an oral rendering. All of you must have seen Teejan Bai's Pandavani? This is a similar thing. It is not Pandavani, but it is called Gondvani. Pandavani is a Chattisgarhi folk theatre where the performer basically performs out the Mahabharata stories – Pandavs and Pandavani. This is a similar art form which is called Gondvani, and it is more prevalent in the Bundelkhand-Gondwana region. And it relates to the exploits and heroic deeds of the Gond kings.

You keep telling me that they are Gond kings, but where is your evidence that they were actually Gonds?

I will just give you a brief intro on how I came into this, because it has something to do with how history gets written. One of our very senior colleagues and friend is a historian in Madhya Pradesh. He has written a book on the Gond kingdoms of Madhya Pradesh. So he was revising his book and he wanted me to look through his text. As I looked through the text, I kept coming across one troubling question.

I asked him – "How do you know that these chaps were Gond kings? You keep telling me that they are Gond kings, but where is your evidence that they were actually Gonds?"

He started thinking – "But everyone calls them Gonds. They are Gonds".

So I asked "In which document of theirs have they said that we are Gonds? In none of their documents do those kings claim that I am a Gond. So how do you know they were Gonds? The British told us, the Bundelas told us, the Marathas told us and the Mughals told us. But the kings themselves never told us that they were Gonds."

So it worried me a lot. Why were they hiding their Gond identity? But it troubled me a lot till I chanced upon a similar issue of Mughal history. I learnt that Mughals never called themselves Mughals. Everyone else called them Mughals. They called themselves Timurid or something else. The reason was that the term 'Mughal' has a very strong tribal association. It derives from Chengizi tribes, and in the Mughal parlance, it meant a bit barbaric kind of character or pre-civilized. It was a derogatory term for the Mughals. So you could see how certain initial identities of these groups, they themselves are forced to do away with.

I learnt that Mughals never called themselves Mughals. Everyone else called them Mughals. They called themselves Timurid or something else.

Then I asked – "If others are calling them Gonds but they are not calling themselves Gonds, how does the Gond community of today look at them? Do they think that they were their kings?"

My friend said, "Of course, they all treat them as such". But how do you know? So after a few days, he came back to me with a book and said, "This is a text which has been published by the Adivasi Kala Parishad, of Gondvani songs. It gives you the Gond version of the history of their kings."

Now I will give you a Hindi translation of that text. We will read a very small part of it. It's a night-long performance, of which I have probably taken out a fifteen-minute stretch. This text has been very beautifully produced by the Madhya Pradesh Government subsequently, in a book called Aakhyaan, meaning a narrative, rendering.

I just want you to read this text and see what it means if I use this as a source of history.

I just want you to read these texts and see what it means if I were to use this as a source of history. Or just as a human being, how am I going to read this and feel – or understand the feelings, what the community thinks about itself and its origins. The Purusha Sukta myth is retold here. But you will see how it is made different, because it comes from a different set of people experiencing life from a different end of the scale.

It will be fun if you sit together in a group and read it aloud. If you read it to yourself, you won't enjoy it as much.

"The original Hindi text is printed at the end of this article."

Subbu: This is not a historical text in the sense that it was not produced by Mr Hirdayshah or Mr Pemalshah, nor by a contemporary. But it is something which has handed down the memory of the Gonds as a community and constantly told, retold, re-retold and expanded as the Gond community progressed in life. And it has been recorded at a point in their history which is far removed from the events it seeks to describe.

Just to give you the historical background of this

story this Hirdayshah and Pemalshah (in Mughal texts he was called Premsingh) were contemporaries of Jehangir. Hirdayshah went and met Jehangir in Mandu. Jehangir records his visit to meet him and pay respects, in his memoirs.

And this is a story which is starting off from the origin myths; but it goes on to build the adventures of this person when he goes to the Mughal court. So there is a "kernel of truth" in this: the historical objective verified independently by other sources is that there was someone called Hirdayshah who went and met the Mughal emperor Jehangir in Mandu. He was there for about a month with Jehangir.

Now, this is followed by another episode. Both the father and the son face the problem that they are evicted from where they are positioned by the Bundelas; and they are basically trying to save their homeland. So they go back to the Mughals to seek their help. The Mughals keep telling them – "Of course we will help you. Who are the Bundelas to throw you out?".

But here, the tragedy of being evicted from their homeland takes the form of a famine. And the trouble that the family faced is transformed into a drought situation, which is what the community keeps facing. So this is the historical - factual kernel of the story.

Now, if I am to write the history of the Gonds, I will say no, this is of no use to me. This piece of literature is of no use because obviously we know all this from the Mughals' source – that this person

went, this was his name, he met, he had this and this thing and he came back. And obviously the rest of the story is all bunk and nonsense. Well, there are certain stories about his adventures – how he runs off with the daughter of the Mughal emperor and they have an affair and the Mughal emperor is very upset about it and he sets his army against him and so on and so forth. It's a typical ballad kind of an adventure of this hero.

Now what do I do with this text? What voices am I hearing? And what do those voices mean to me? What are they telling me?

So this is the story. Now I get this text a good four hundred years after this event has happened. And if you go to creation, it is probably even further than that. Now what do I do with this text? What voices am I hearing? And what do those voices mean to me? What are they telling me? This is the question. I will request you all to reflect on this question. Whatever comes to your mind, share it. And this will take the history further.

Responses and Interpretations

Anand: It gives a sense of how they see the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Bhil, etc.

Subbu: So one, we get an understanding of how this community views other communities and what is their conception about those communities.

Vijay: Just to build on this, I think there is also a huge desire to join the mainstream. If the mainstream story is about Brahma and Brahmana shakti, they also want to join that. As well as, you

also see that using the same kind of myth in terms of samudra manthan and so on – using the same idiom to also generate their own.

Subbu: There is a deep desire to appropriate the Brahminic symbols and the Brahminic frameworks. But is it being appropriated in the same way, or is it being sort of remodelled? What is that remodelling? What is the direction of that remodelling?

But is it being appropriated in the same way, or is it being sort of remodelled? What is that remodelling? What is the direction of that remodelling?

Nilanjan: The Brahmin and the Kshatriya virtues are being projected as vices. The Brahmin can't do anything by himself – he depends on others.

Subbu: And this chap who goes around swashing his sword will probably kill everyone off. That is the point. See, it is their version of what they think the other communities are up to.

Devika: Even after the manthan, as they emerge, based on how they look, they are being sent away for different tasks to the forest. You are like this, you go there. You go across the Narmada. You sustain yourself on roots; you kill animals for your sustenance. Depending on how you look and what your appearance is like.

Subbu: It is something to be noted. They are actually replaying the origin of the order they knew. They knew that the Baiga is this chap who is hunting/gathering up there, and the Bhils are these chaps out there who are traditionally known to be people who loot people who pass by – and they are on the other side of the Narmada. There are these Raj Gonds and these kheti-kisani waale (agricultural) Gonds.

So it is basically trying to restate the existing order as they know, but giving it this angle – trying to say how it originated and kind of explaining a social order.

Prashant: When we ask such questions – that this Bhil and this Baiga Baba and this Kol and bhariya – they were actually spread across this geographical area – Madhya Pradesh. You may call this kanthopakanthan – oral tradition – but it is important to know the origin from where it first started. I mean, whether they are taking these facts and putting in their creation, or we can actually relate those facts to creation.

I am trying to say that by critically analyzing these facts I see that there is a bit of reflection of society. Like there is this - if I go to my brother's home, I will have to take along some liquor, or I hadn't taken anything at the time of my wedding; perhaps he'll give me now. So we can relate the current situation to the past situation – how it happens…

Subbu: So they are transposing their current notions of norms, morality, practices and modes onto the past. So it is also in a way restating the normative system.

Ganesh: I think, somewhere, this Gond was also trying to say that they also know the geography and history, in the sense that they are saying that one community had gone to the East and one community had gone to the West. I don't know whether they also want to say that we also know the world, though we are not placed high in the caste chain.

And the second is, I don't know whether there is an unsaid expression about the role that women played; because everything is a 'he' here. And somewhere they are saying that torn clothes are better than committing robbery. So I don't know whether there is an unsaid expression that you play a second role, so listen to what I am saying.

Anjali: Actually in this creation myth the creation of woman is missing. In the Christian myth there is mention, in whatever way, of the creation of woman.

The second thing, Subbu, which you were saying later on – one, these myths are obviously quite modern. So the same myth, much earlier on, from the mouths of Gonds, would have had other elements. Unless it is dated, but we don't know when it originated.

How do you privilege Jehangir's version on the drought issue? Whether they were under the Bundelas or whether it was drought how the oppressed or the others feel themselves and what is the other version?

The third thing which you were saying and connected with what Kancha Ilaiah was talking about is – how do you privilege Jehangir's version on the drought issue? Whether they were under the Bundelas or whether it was drought how the oppressed or the others feel themselves and what is the other version? And even in the other version, now we see through the media that there is a lot of doctoring of the other versions as well.

So in this process of history where certain versions get privileged, why do they get privileged?

Subbu: One way that is normally done in History is through a process of cross-checking. So you look

at other references – you have Bundela records, their histories, and their letters. So you can cross-check whether the basic frames, are congruent or not. The fact is still that Jehangir, when he writes, is writing Jehangir's history of Jehangir.

The fact is still that Jehangir, when he writes, is writing Jehangir's history of Jehangir.

So he has to project himself, and these people who come begging. So you could visualize what he thought of this puny little chap coming from Gondwana and saying Saab, badhaai ho – aap Baadshah bun gaye (Congratulations, Sire, you have become the emperor).

Nilanjan: This god creating the king, etc – the sequencing which god offers is interesting, because it shows that the power hierarchy always is more inside them. Because God offers the Brahmin first, then the Kshatriya, and the last choice is this fellow. So he puts in satire and all that saying - Boss, you two guys are actually not capable, which is why you didn't accept. But in God's view, it is the Brahmin, then the Kshatriya and then the Gond.

Subbu: But this is the way Gonds are countering an established socially accepted norm. See these Gond communities are actually living in a different context. They are no longer in the forests. They are now living settled lives in the larger Bundelkhand area – what is now Bundelkhand. And they are constantly relating to other castes/communities. So this issue of Ram and Brahma and everything is because they are in constant communication with other communities; and they are competing with those communities for establishing their own identity as Gonds. So at first they say, yes, the

Brahmin is superior. But look, when it came to it, he couldn't deliver.

Rohit: This is common, the world across, for the farming community. Looking at the Kazakhs of Russia and several others, farming communities look at themselves as paalanhaar (caretakers) of the world.

Looking at the Kazakhs of Russia and several others, farming communities look at themselves as paalanhaar (caretaker) of the world.

Subbu: See, the first thing – uss ko paalan karna aata nahi hain (he doesn't know how to rule) – that is very important – the self-image of being the innocent, goody-goody chaps who will say yes to everything. Bhagvaan nay bola raajya sambhaal lo, toh sambhaal liya, Na kehna toh aata nahi tha usko (God said take care of the kingdom, and he did. He didn't know how to say no).

Vijay: I was also wondering whether the names of the kings also show something. You actually have a name like Hirdayshah. Shah also shows some kind of Islamic connection. There is some linkage. They are also trying to aspire to become like Mughal kings.

Subbu: Yes. There was a point after Durgavati died, or just before Durgavati – their earlier king – they used to be Singhs before. Singh again is important; because it is a Rajput title. From just before Durgavati, there was this chap called Sangram Singh. Sangram Singh happily changed his name to Sangram Shah. And after that, all the Gond kings called themselves Shah. But – the most interesting part – the Mughals never called them Shah.

They called him Prem Singh. They would never say Prem Shah. Shah is an imperial title which the Mughals claimed. They wouldn't allow it to them.

Sreekanth: If this is the way of looking at their past, there is something metaphysical about it. That kind of thinking seems to be evident, whether it is about the caste system, or about the need for a king or about these different tribes which geographically existed in different areas. Everything has always been like that. So in this way of looking at the past, there is no deeper look at the historical processes that created anything. It gives the impression that it has always been like that.

So these myths are not histories. They basically restate what is existing in a way which is favourable to my self-image.

Subbu: So these myths are not histories. They basically restate what is existing in a way which is favourable to my self-image. See, they are not questioning – why did it come into being? Their question is – this is how it is; and the order that has been established to restate that order in a certain form which privileges your position.

Srinjoy: From what I could observe, for me this was a narrative totally based on aspiration with the Gondwa people – they are aspiring for happiness, they are aspiring for peace, maybe with a king with a whip in his hand, and aspiring for trust also, where I think the swan things come at the last part.

Sriparna: I see an interesting contradiction in how they see the king. In the beginning, he is everybody's caretaker and in the end it is someone who uses a chaabuk (whip) to get everyone on track.

Subbu: It continues. The king is himself begging for his sustenance. He hasn't come to the state of a beggar per se, but he is drifting. Bheekh liya nahi uss nay – jo hanson nay diya woh manaa kar rahe hain (he did not accept alms – refused what the swan offered him). That is very important.

Look, these two motifs are different. Help is accepted from relatives and acquaintances. It is a reciprocal relationship. But the relationship with the hans (swan) is a hierarchical relation. Maine tumko diya tha – I gifted it to you. I cannot take it back from you. So this donor-donee relationship is different from a reciprocal help relationship.

Maitreyee: I see a strong ecological statement also; because a person who is not fit to be a king is sent off to the east to survive on roots and herbs. And when there is a famine in the area, the king himself has to do that. So, you know, I think a respect for the ecology of the area is underlined.

Subbu: To me there is an extension of the ecological argument here. There is a certain world view of what an agricultural Gond is doing to the world. The Gond is not just reproducing himself, but he is reproducing the entire natural order, including the birds and the trees and others around. So he has the centrality in that world, in sustaining that world.

So the swan is perturbed that this person helped us out of our trouble and now that he's in a crisis, it is for us to help him. But I don't want to take their help. That is very important. Because who I accept

help from is a very important status statement.

Manish: Constantly, the occupation which is considered quite superior is kisaani (agriculture). So it says that there it is not a narrative of a pastoralist community or of a community which is moving from one place to another. But here it is of a community which lives a settled agricultural life.

The second thing is that they are associating political power and kingship. So on one hand there is an aspect of welfare and use of repressive power through this. But at the same time, the king doesn't have to work – doesn't have to labour. What kind of economic capacities would that person have? All such associations also show that within Gond society, there is this divide of Raj Gond and others. It also points to – because two Gonds developed here, as they themselves are saying – what were the internal hierarchies within.

Summation

Subbu: See, I'll just quickly conclude. The idea is not that you are going to arrive at any definitive understanding of how we will use this text, but just to give you a feel of what it means to recover voices and the kind of issues that are in them.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that agricultural work – and labour and production – is central in this whole image. See, what Kancha Ilaiah was talking about in the morning (was) the loss of this centrality to the king as a ruler, or the Brahmin as a priest, or a Bania as someone else.

Instead of that, here what you have is a centrality of labour process – centrality of labour and respect for labour. The king says "if there is no food, go chop some wood or go hunting. If even that doesn't help, take to agriculture". So the king himself eventually gets around to doing all that. Or before that, to put the fact that "we, the cultivators alone, are sustaining the world". And they are kind of restoring or asserting the dignity of the labouring and production process.

"We, the cultivators alone, are sustaining the world". And they are kind of restoring or asserting the dignity of the labouring and production process.

I think it is a very important message that this is very different from any other text that you will read.

Anjali: In the context of History education, I felt that usually the myths go as history in people's lives. And we usually don't bring them into the classroom. We try to keep them out. And it's the same thing as getting children's experiences into the classroom and making them a part of the social science, science or whatever discourse, so that then the actual concept is developed. This is not history, but a certain version of history.

I think it is important to get oral traditions into the classroom, and do this kind of an exercise of exploration of also corroborating texts through others which is the kind of work that schools like CFL or Rishi Valley, or others do take up this kind of project. At present, in government schools it may not be possible. But in terms of the pedagogy of History, it is important to bring in artefacts like this. And particularly, myths are the most difficult to handle.

So training teachers as to how to handle these things – neither to take them as history, which the

community is taking, nor to reject them and say that they have no place in history – that I think is something which is important.

I think it is important to get oral traditions into the classroom, and do this kind of an exercise of exploration of also corroborating texts through others

Subbu: That's a related point. But my problem is not what you are going to do in the school, or in the classroom. The problem is, historians have ignored these texts. This book is published by the Adivasi Kala Parishad. No historian would touch it with a bargepole. No historian had so far touched it till I and this friend of ours worked on this and tried to see how we are going to incorporate it within this larger book on Gond kings. It has been published and republished in several editions. Actually I have seen three editions of this.

To historians, Mughal archives, documents with the seals of kings and emperors, or travelogues – something which can be authenticated as a product of some period will only be taken up. These are not sources for us; these are not traces for us.

But when I look at it, it certainly is a trace of the Gond community as it exists today. But it also tells me a lot about how this community visualizes its past which has a bearing on that kingdom. That kingdom itself may have been four hundred years old. But obviously, elements of this tradition have been coming down from that kingdom.

The name Pemalshah has not been concocted from somewhere. It has been passed down. His adventures in the Mughal court obviously have been passed down through that. So you cannot actually dismiss it. To me, it has something to tell me, the same way

as the texts on Mughals and their behaviour tells me.

If I can give a parallel story here – the Mughals are extremely obsessed about, as I had said, the harem. This is one. They are extremely obsessed about their architecture – we built the Taj Mahals and the Jama Masjids and the Lal Qilas and Fatehpur Sikris. But this Hirdayshah, son of Pemalshah, gets into trouble with Jehangir for two reasons. One – he goes and has hanky-panky with a girl. The other thing is that he builds a building which is taller than any building on earth. He builds the tallest building and the Mughal emperor, from somewhere, happens to sight it. He says, 'Who has built this huge building?' and then he gets all worked up about it and then of course he is quite angry about this. He says 'Go and demolish it'; the other says 'why should I demolish' – and so the story goes on.

But the Mughal symbols of power and authority and sacredness are constantly being questioned here. And the superiority of this local folk hero over the Mughals is constantly sought to be established.

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Hindi Text

भावार्थ

राजा पेलमशाह

राम का नाम सुमरन कर ले मेरे भाई

मन में संतो कर ले भई

बिगड़ी बात सब वही संभालेंगे रे दादा

राम चन्द्र रघुवीर रे भाई

संकट विपत्ति में रे मेरे साथी

राम का ही आधार है

कुटुंब परिवार कोई साथ नहीं देता रे दादा

जब भारी विपत्ति पड़ती है रे भाई

यह कथा सत्यवादी गोंड राजा पेमलशाह तथा उनके पुत्र हिरदेशाह की वीरता का है जिनके नाम से दिल्ली का बादशाह भी काँप उठता है।

बात सतयुग की है जब सबका जन्म हुआ था। ब्राह्मण, क्षत्रिय और गोंड आदि की रचना भी संसार की रचना के साथ ब्रह्मा ने किया था। ब्रह्मा जी एक दिन अपने मन में सोचते हैं कि मैंने इतने बड़े संसार की रचना तो कर डाली है, परन्तु इस संसार के पालने का भार किसको दूँ? यह समझ में नहीं आ रहा। किसी को तो इसकी जिम्मेदारी देनी ही होगी।

अब ब्रह्मा ब्राह्मण और क्षत्रिय तथा गोंड को अपने पास बुलाते हैं। ब्रह्मा सबसे पहले ब्राह्मण से कहते हैं कि तुम मेरे पुत्रों में सबसे ज्यादा पढ़े–लिखे हो। इसलिये तुम इस पृथ्वी का भार संभालो। तुम्हें मेरी पृथ्वी पर जितने भी जीव–जन्तु हैं, सभी को भोजन कराना होगा। सभी के पालन–पो ाण का भार उठाना होगा।

यह सुनते ही ब्राह्मण साफ मना कर देता है। यह काम मुझसे नहीं होगा महाराज। मुझसे बात करा लो, किताबें पढ़वा लो, पर मैं यह काम करना क्या जानूँ। मैं तो स्वयं दूसरों के

सहारे अपना जीवन चलाता हूँ। मैं आपके संसार को केसे पाल सकूँगा?

अब ब्रह्मा ने क्षत्रिय को बुलाया है। ब्रह्मा कहते हैं - सुन रे क्षत्रिय बेटा! तुम तो बड़े बलवाल हो, तुम इस संसार का भार अपने ऊपर ले लो, तो मैं निश्चिंत हो जाऊँगा, पर क्षत्रिय कहता है कि मुझसे तो आप मार–काट करा लो, पर यह पालने का बोझ मैं नहीं उठा सकता। मैं हूँ गुस्से वाला आदमी। जरा-सी बात पर मैं तलवार चला देता हूँ यदि यह काम देंगे तो आपके संसार में एक भी जीव जिन्दा नहीं बचेगा। आप किसी और से कहकर देख लें। इतना कहकर क्षत्रिय चला गया।

अब ब्रह्मा सोचते हैं मन में कि ब्रह्मण बहुत चतुर था, उसने मना कर दिया, क्षत्रिय बलवान था, पर उसने भी मना कर दिया। अब बचा है गोंड लड़का, बहुत ही सरल है न किसी के तीन में न किसी के पाँच में, मैं उससे कहकर देखता हूँ। अब बुलाया है ब्रह्मा ने गोंड को और कहते ह –मैंने इतने बड़े संसार की रचना कर डाली है। लाखों जीव-जन्तु बना डाला है। आखिर उनका पेट कौन भरेगा? यही सोचकर परेशान हूँ।

ब्राह्मण को बुलाया उसने मना कर दिया, क्षत्रिय को बुलाया उसने भी मना कर दिया। अब तुम बचे हो बेटा। तुम संसार को पालने की जिम्मेदारी ले लेते, तो मैं निश्चिंत हो जाता। गोंड लड़का मना करना तो जानता ही नहीं था। ब्रह्मा जी का आदेश उसने स्वीकार कर लिया।

ब्रह्मा जी अत्यन्त प्रसन्न हुए। उनके मन पर पड़ा बोझ उतर गया था। उन्होंने गोंड को हल तथा बैल दिया तथा कहा कि आज से तुम्हें लोग किसान कहेंगे। जमीन जोतकर अनाज उगाना। उसी से संसार के सभी जीव-जन्तुओं का पालन हो जायेगा। हल तथा बैल लेकर गोंड चल पड़ता है।

गढ़ा जबलपुर में पहुँचा है गोंड, ऊँची-सी पहाड़ी पर डाल दिया है डेरा, जुट गया है सब गोंड समाज और बढ़ने लगी सेना गोंडों की, पर इसी के साथ ही सब आपस में लड़ने–झगड़ने लगे हैं। किसी का कहना कोई नहीं मानते, अब ब्रह्मा सोच में पड़ गये हैं कि ये तो आपस में लड़े-मरे जा रहे हैं। ऐसा ही होता रहेगा तो मेरे संसार को कौन पालेगा? न हो तो इनमें से एक राजा पैदा कर देता हूँ।

अब ब्रह्मा गोंड के ारीर को मथते हैं, साल लकड़ी की मथानी साँप की डोरी लगाई है, चौदह देवता मथने में लगे हैं। गोंड के ारीर से एक भील लड़का निकलता है, मुँह उसका टोकनी के समान है और हाथ में तीर कमान रखे हैं।

देवता कहते हैं – नहीं, यह नहीं है राजा लायक। यह राजा जैसा नहीं दिखता। यह तो

पूरे गाँवों को लूट–लूटकर खा जायेगा। जा रे भाई भील! दिन डूबने की दिशा में भाग जा। नर्मदा के उस पार जंगलों में रहना और लूटपाट करके खाना। अब फिर से मथ रहे हैं ारीर को। अब की बार निकला है बैगा बाबा, रखे हैं हाथ में गैंती। टंगी है कंधे पर टोकनी। बड़े–बड़े पुठ्ठे है उसके। देखकर कहते हैं ब्रह्मा! तुम तो जंगल में रहने वाले हो भाई। तुम राज्य क्या चलाओगे? जा भाग जा दिन निकलने की दिशा में। नर्मदा के निकासी के पास के जंगलों में वहाँ कंदमूल खोदकर खाना।

अब देवता फिर से मथते हैं गोंड के शरीर को और तब निकला है गोंड, कंधे पर हल तो हाथ में पैनारी रखे। ब्रह्मा कहते हैं यही तो है मेरे संसार का पालन हार! तुम तो कमाने वाले पुत्र हो रे भाई। तुम कहाँ से राजपाट सम्हालोगे। तुम यहीं जहाँ धरती दिखे खेती किसानी करना। अब फिर से मथ रहे हैं अब निकले हैं कोल और भारिया रखे हैं कंधे पर कुदाली और हाथ में कुल्हाड़ी, उन्हें देख ब्रह्मा कहते हैं कि तुम तो कबाड़ी हो, तुम्हें राज करना नहीं आयेगा। जाओ मेरे गोंड लड़के के साथ रहना और कबाड़ का काम करना। ब्रह्मा अत्यन्त निराश हैं। अभी तक इतने परिश्रम के बाद भी कोई उपयुक्त आदमी नहीं मिला। देवता फिर मिलकर प्रयास करते हैं, अबकी बार खूब मथने के बाद गोंड निकला है और उसके हाथ में चाबुक है। ब्रह्मा जी अब निश्चिंत हो जाते हैं। इतने परिश्रम के बाद अब मुझे राजा मिल गया है। यह राज चलाने में सक्षम है। अपने चाबुक से सबको रास्ते पर लायेगा। उन्होंने उसे राजा बना दिया तथा वापस अपने लोक चले गये। तभी से गोंड राजा राज्य करने लगे हैं; इसी राजवंश में ही राजा पेमलशाह आगे चलकर प्रसिद्ध राजा हुए हैं जिनके चारों भाइयों – दूधनशाह, बूड़नशाह, शंकरशाह, दलपतशाह। सभी ने अपने-अपने पत्नी और बच्चों के साथ अलग–अलग परिवार बसा लिया है।

राजा पेमलशाह गढ़ा में राज्य करते थे। पेमलशाह का राज्य अत्यंत समृद्ध और सम्पन्न था। खेतीबाड़ी तथा दूसरे कारोबार बड़े पैमाने पर होते थे। प्रजा अत्यन्त खुश थीं पर सभी दिन एक समान नहीं होते। सुख के बाद दुख, दिन के बाद रात आती है; बड़े से बड़े पराक्रमी व्यक्ति को भी दुर्दिन देखना पड़ा है। भगवान सूर्य देव को भी अन्ततः डूबना पड़ता है उनमें भी वह गरमी नहीं रहती तो फिर धन-दौलत कहाँ बचा है?

अचानक पड़े अकाल से राजा पेमलशाह पर भी विपत्ति आ गई है। अन्न का एक दाना भी पैदा नहीं हुआ। सारे जानवर मर रहे हैं, जनता त्राहि-त्राहि कर रही है। नौकर चाकर सब छोड़-छोड़कर भाग गये हैं। अकाल में चोरी डकैती खूब बढ़ गई है। राजा पूरी तरह असहाय हो गये हैं। विपत्ति का क्या है? राजा राम, लक्ष्मण पर पड़ी थी उन्हें वन-वन भटकना पड़ा था, पाण्डवों पर पड़ी थी, उन्हें नौकर-चाकर बनकर दिन गुजारना

पड़ा था। यह विपत्ति तो एक न एक दिन सब पर आती है इसी तरह पेमलशाह पर यह अकाल के रूप में पड़ी है; जो राजा सोने-चाँदी की थाली में तरह-तरह के व्यंजन खाते थे वे आज कंदमूल खाकर गुजारा करने को बाध्य हैं। रानी पोहपाल के शरीर पर कपड़ों की जगह फटे–पुराने चिथड़े हैं। राजा रानी का शरीर कमजोर हो गया है।

एक दिन चारों तरफ से निराश हो रानी-राजा से कहती है कि बिना अन्न के यह जीवन कैसे चलेगा? न होता तो आप अपने पुराने दीवान अथवा अपने किसी रिश्तेदार से मिल आते। हो सकता है उनसे कुछ सहायता मिल जाती। पर कहते हैं न कि सुख में तो सभी साथ देते हैं, पर विपत्ति में कोई नहीं। राजा सब जगह घूमते हैं पर सहायता कहीं से नहीं मिलती; सब बहाना बनाते हैं कि खुद ही हम खाने के बिना मर रहे हैं, आपको कहाँ से दे पायेंगे?

थक हारकर निराश राजा आते हैं घर वापस। जीवन कैसे चलेगा अन्न बिना? कंदमूल खाकर कब तक जीवित रह पायेंगे? दुखी राजा रानी से कहते हैं कि सब जगह से निराशा ही हाथ लगी है। न होता तो तुम अपने मायके चली जाती, वहाँ से जरूर कुछ सहायता मिलेगी। अब कोई उपाय न देख रानी जाने को तैयार होती है। कहती है रानी कि हाँ मेरे दहेज की एक भैंस, एक बकरी, हीरा नगीना बैल हैं जो ाादी के समय मुझे नहीं दिया गया था। अब मांगकर देखती हूँ शायद मिल जाय। राजा समझाते हैं कि रानी यदि यही मिल जाय तो हम लोग खेतीकर जीवन जी लेंगे।

पर बिना ढंग के कपड़े के रानी मायके जाने में संकोच करती है। कहती है कि ऐसी दशा में जाने में शर्म आती है। तब समझाते हैं राज कि गरीबी की मार तो भगवान की देन है। चोरी में शर्म है पर गरीबी में कैसी शर्म? भगवान की ऐसी ही इच्छा है, जो वह देगा वही तो खायेंगे, पहनेंगे। रानी जाने को तैयार है पर कहती है कि क्या मैं ऐसे ही चली जाऊँगी। आखिर बहुत दिनों पर जा रही हूँ भाई–भौजाई के घर। थोड़ी बहुत ाराब तो रखनी ही पड़ेगी। खाली हाथ कैसे जाऊँ? कहते हैं राजा कि अपने पास तो धेला तक नहीं है, शराब कहाँ से खरीदें? तब उपाय बताती है रानी कि जंगल से लकड़ी काट लाओ उसे बेचकर उससे मिले पैसे से शराब खरीद लेंगे।

तब कुल्हाड़ी लेकर राजा जंगल चले जाते हैं। लकड़ी काटकर गट्टा अपने सिर पर रख वापस आते हैं। आदत के बिना इतना बोझ भी उनसे उठाया नहीं जा रहा है। एक तालाब देख किनारे पर विश्राम करने की सोचते हैं। राजा जब तालाब में मुँह हाथ धो रहे हैं उसी समय किनारे पर हंसों का एक जोड़ा आपस में बात करता है। कैसी विपदा पड़ी है राजा पर; सोने चाँदी के बीच रहने वाला राजा आज जंगल में लकड़ी काट रहा है। और हंसों का जोड़ा कहता है कि इनके खेत में हम और हमारे लड़के-बच्चे खूब दाना

खाकर पले हैं। आखिर उसका बदला हम जरूर चुकाएँगें।

ऐसा विचार कर हंसों का जोड़ा उड़ गया है आकाश में, जाकर पहुँच गये हैं सागर में, वहाँ से अपनी-अपनी चोंच में मोती बीन-बीनकर फिर राजा के पास पहुँचते हैं।

हंस-हंसिनी राजा को अपने पास बुलाते हैं तथा अपने साथ लाये मोती उनके सामने गिराते हैं और कहते हैं कि दुर्दिन में कोई काम नहीं आता, सभी सुख के साथी हैं रे राजा। हम और हमारे बच्चों ने तुम्हारे खेत से अनाज चुगा था, उसी का बदला हम आज चुका रहे हैं। इनसे अपनी दरिद्रता दूर करो। पर राजा मोतियों को देखकर अट्टाहास कर उठते हैं। उन्हें हँसता देख हंस सोचते हैं कि शायद धन देखकर राजा...

King Pemalshah

A Paraphrased Tale

Rendered into English by Satyendra Tripathi

Keep remembering the name of Ram, my brother!Have contentment in your heart, O brother! For He alone will set right the things gone wrong, O elder brother!

He who is Ramchandra and Raghubir, O brother!

When faced with crisis and calamity, my friend,

Ram alone can be counted upon.

Neither the clan, nor the family comes to one's aid,

When grave calamity befalls, O brother!

This tale is about the heroic valour of King Pemalshah and his son Hirdeshah whose names make even the emperor of Delhi tremble.

The story begins in the age of Satyug when all were born. Along with the creation of the world, Brahma had also created the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Gond, etc. One day, Brahmaji thought to himself: "I have created this vast

world. Now, whom should I entrust with its sustenance? It is a vexing problem, but someone or the other will have to be given this responsibility."

Brahma then summons the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Gond by turns. First, he says to the Brahmin, "You are the most educated among my sons. So, you must bear the burden of this earth. You must feed all the creatures there are in the world. You will have to provide sustenance to all."

The Brahmin at once declines to do it saying, "Maharaj, this task is beyond me. Ask me to chatter away, or have me read books, and I will do so, but what do I know about this work? I am myself dependent on others for my survival, how can I then provide for your whole world?"

Brahma then calls the Kshatriya and says to him, "Listen to me, O my Kshatriya son! You are so mighty. If you take the burden of the world upon your shoulders it will rid me of my worry." But the Kshatriya replies, "I can gladly fight and kill for you, but I can't carry this burden of sustaining the world. I am so short-tempered that even the slightest thing makes me draw my sword. If you entrust me with this job, not a single creature will survive in your world. Ask someone else for it." Saying this, the Kshatriya went away.

Brahma then thinks to himself: "The Brahmin was very smart but he refused; the Kshatriya was very powerful but he too turned me down. Now only the Gond son remains, who is very unassuming and guile-less. He is not partial to anyone and he keeps aloof from quarrels of others. I shall ask him and see." Brahma calls the Gond and asks him, "I have created such a huge world and made millions of living beings. Who will feed them, after all? I am constantly plagued by this worry. I called upon the Brahmin to shoulder this responsibility but he refused, then I called the Kshatriya but he too turned me down. You are my only hope now. If you take on this responsibility I shall rest assured in relief." The Gond son knew not how to refuse. He accepted the challenge and bowed to Brahma ji's wish.

Brahma ji was very pleased. It had taken a great load off his mind. He gave a plough and bullocks to the Gond and said, "People will henceforth call you a farmer. Plough the land and cultivate grain on it. That will nourish and sustain

all the living creatures." The Gond leaves with the plough and bullocks.

The Gond has arrived at Garha Jabalpur and settled down on top of a high hill. Gradually, the Gond community has flocked around and the army of Gonds has grown. But at the same time they have all begun to quarrel and fight among themselves. Nobody listens to and obeys anybody. Brahma is again worried and says to himself, "These people are busy killing one another. Who will sustain the world if things go on like this? I had better produce a King from amongst them."

Brahma now churns the Gond's body with a churner made of the Sal wood, the rope being a snake and fourteen gods doing the actual churning. From the Gond's body, first emerges a Bhil boy with a basket-like mouth, carrying a bow and arrows in his hands.

The gods say "No, no! He is not fit to be a King. He doesn't look like a King. He will rob and plunder all the villages." Then they say to him, "Go, O brother Bhil! Run along and go in the direction of the setting sun. Remain in the forests on the other side of the Narmada and earn your living by robbing others." Now, the gods are again churning the Gond's body. This time, a Baiga baba emerges carrying a pickaxe in his hand and a basket slung over his shoulder. He has big buttocks. Brahma looks him over and says, "You are a forest dweller, my dear fellow! How can you run a Kingdom? Run along and go in the direction where the day rises. Dwell in the forests near the mouth of the Narmada and dig up tubers available there for your food."

Now the gods again churn the Gond's body and there emerges a Gond with a plough upon his shoulder and a sickle in his hand. Brahma says that he is the one to provide for his world! He then tells him, "Son! You are the provider. How will you take care of a Kingdom? Engage yourself in cultivating the land around here wherever you find it." They have begun the churning again and there emerge Kol and Bhariya with a pickaxe on their shoulders and an axe in their hands. Brahma looks at them and says, "You are junk gatherers and labourers. Go and live with my Gond son and carry on odd jobs." Brahma is very disheartened that after so much hard work they have been unable to come

up with a suitable person. Now, all the gods together try once more with great vigour. After prolonged churning this time, there comes out a Gond with a whip in his hand. Relieved that all the hard work has paid off, Brahma ji says to himself, "I have found a King at last. He is capable of ruling over a Kingdom. He will keep everybody in line with his whip." Brahma ji made him the King and went back to his celestial abode. Gond Kings have ruled ever since; it is in this dynasty in the course of time that there has been the advent of the famous King Pemalshah, whose four brothers – Dudhanshah, Budanshah, Shankarshah and Dalpatshah – settled away separately with their families.

King Pemalshah ruled in Garha. Pemalshah's Kingdom was very rich and prosperous. Cultivation and other trades flourished on a large scale. People were very happy. But times never remain the same. Misery follows happiness as surely as night follows day; even the mighty fall upon evil days. Eventually, even the Sun god has to set and his warmth ebbs away. How can wealth and prosperity last forever then?

A sudden famine has brought a calamity upon King Pemalshah. Not a seed of grain has been produced. All the animals are dying. The people are crying out for relief. All the servants and workers have fled. Thefts and robberies have multiplied due to famine. The King has become totally helpless. Misfortune befalls everyone sometimes or the other. King Ram and Laxman had to suffer it and wander through forests. The Pandavas had to face it and pass their days as servants. Calamity falls upon on all one day and thus it has descended on King Pemalshah in the form of famine. The King who used to savour a variety of dishes in plates of gold and silver is hard pressed to survive on tubers. The queen Pohpal is clad in rags now instead of regal clothes. The King and queen have become emaciated.

The queen, being totally dejected from all sides, says to the King one day, "How can our lives go on without any grain? You could perhaps approach your old minister and relatives, and maybe get some help from them." But, as the saying goes, there are many to share in one's good fortune but misfortune has to be borne alone. The King scours all around for help, but doesn't get it anywhere; all make excuses, "How can we give anything to you when we are ourselves starving?"

Weary and forlorn, the King returns home. How to survive without grain? How long can they live on a diet of tubers? The dejected and depressed King tells the queen that all his efforts for getting help have come to naught. He suggests to her that she should go to her parental home and her people would surely offer some help. Seeing no other option, the queen consents to go there. She says, "Yes, there still remains a buffalo, a goat and the bullocks Hira and Nagina, owed to me as part of my dowry as they were not given to me at the time of the marriage. I will ask for them now and maybe I will get them." The King tells her that even if they got that much help they could live off the land through farming.

However, the queen feels shy about going to her parents' place without decent clothes. She says that she feels ashamed of going there dressed as shabbily as she was. Then the King tells her, "The curse of poverty is also brought upon by God. There is shame in thievery, but what shame can there be in poverty? Whatever God gives us that we shall eat and wear." The queen agrees to go, but then says, "How can I go there like this? After all, I am going to my brother and sister-in-law's place after such a long time. I shall have to take a little liquor as a gift for them. How can I go empty-handed?" The King says, "We don't even have a copper coin. How can we buy liquor then?" At this, the queen suggests that he should cut some wood from the forest which could then be sold and the money thus gained would enable them to buy liquor.

Then picking up his axe, the King goes to the forest. He cuts wood and ties it in a bundle which he carries on his head while returning home. Not being used to such labour, he is finding it hard to carry that load. Passing by a pond, he thinks of resting for a while. When the King is washing his hands and face in the pond, a pair of swans at the edge of the pond are talKing among themselves: "What a calamity has struck the King. The King who lived amidst splendour of gold and silver is cutting wood in the forest today. We and our children have nourished ourselves by feeding well on the grains in his fields. We must pay back the favour we owe him."

With this resolve, the pair of swans soars into the sky, reaches the sea and picks pearls from its depths in their beaks, then returns to where the King was resting.

The swans beckon the King and let the pearls fall on the ground before him and say, "O King! Nobody offers succour in misfortune, as all are fair-weather companions. We and our children had fed on the grains in your fields. We are repaying our debt today. Take these pearls and be rid of your poverty." But, the King looks at the pearls and roars with laughter…..

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How History is Actually Written — The Method of the Historian

CN Subramanian

- ..... *The Purpose of History-writing*
- ..... *The Methods, Process and Validation*
- ..... *The Questions We ask of History*

How History is Actually Written — The method of the Historian

CN Subramanian, Eklavya

Some issues people have been raising repeatedly, which you obviously thought the historians were not terribly worried about. Let me start with some of these general issues. I will start with two statements which I will write down here.

Shankara, in one of the poems attributed to him makes this statement

Kastvam koham kuta aayaatam.

Kastvam – who are you? Koham – who am I? Where have we come from?

Sansaaroyam ateeva vichitra

The world is full of variety

Statement 2 comes from Kabir's bhajans.

Kabira Soee Peer Hain, Jo Jaane Par Peer

Kabira is the master who understands the pain of others.

The two peers mean two different things. The second thing is peeda (pain), the first one is peer (master).

All of us know – and it is a very common-sensical view –

that History is all about understanding what happened in the past and what kind of changes took place over time. If you freeze time – if time did not change – then there is no question of history; there is no question of change, and there is no agenda for a historian. So, History is essentially a study of change over time.

Second – History is a craft which tries to understand the past through sources, or what you call the traces of the past. So we try to understand the past and the change, but through the medium of sources – interpreting the sources.

There is a third thing which is slightly complicated – that history is also a reflection on itself. Every historical production of knowledge or construction of knowledge is first a critique of history as a method – the method that has been adopted in the past, the history as it had been written in the past, and the need to restate it. So History-writing is essentially always a methodological review of the way it constructed knowledge about something in the past.

So, all history-writing will have these three components, called – the Footnote component, the Change component and the Review of Itself component.

What is the object of historical study? When I am looking at History, what am I looking for?

The purpose of History-Writing

Now – what is the object of historical study? When I am looking at History, what am I looking for? When I am talking of human history, what am I looking at?

The second question is – what is the Objectivity of historical study? Object is there; but is it objective? Does it represent the truth out there?

The third question that I would ask is why are we worried

about history? There are a hundred things to worry about in the world. We could have worried about why hasn't the sky fallen on my head. But why am I constantly returning to this theme of history?

I would say that history is essential to the project of identity-building. What is this identity? 'Who am I' and 'What am I' are actually defined by the 'Where have I come from'. What has made me what I am? And unless I am uncovering this, answering this question about the Self and the Other is going to be extremely difficult. It cannot be done without the enquiry into history.

I would say that history is essential to the project of identity-building. 'Who am I' and 'What am I' are actually defined by the 'Where have I come from'. What has made me what I am?

So all history-writing ultimately tries to understand me as a human being in whatever context I would like to situate myself. It could be me as a human being, it could be me as a Gond, it could be me as a Dalit, me as an Indian national… Whatever identities I am constructing, those identities are a part of that project of identity-construction which is to build a history of that identity.

Identity and the history are central to a person or a community because Identity not only tells you where you came from, but it also tells you where you ought to go. So, History is not just about what happened before point zero. But it is a continuum which is going to take me up till there. So all visions of history also have inherent in them a vision of continuity of time into the future. And that vision of continuity and the sense of identity give me the agency and the purpose for agency.

What the Partidar Samaj of Dewas or Malwa will do depends a lot on what the Partidar Samaj thinks and where they are situated. Who are their friends and who are their foes? What do they have to do? That sense of identity and purpose for that community is given by a sense of history – not just of the past, but of its

continuity into the future, which is why history becomes central to any idea of identity. It could be at any level – at the level of the individual or the level of nations, global levels, or community levels.

The other point is that there are multiple identities – both for the individual and the individual that is coexisting and experiencing a common reality. I, as a Brahmin, may be there. I may also be a citizen of this country, I may be a historian, I may be a member of Eklavya, I may be something else – that's my multiple identity. But Eklavya is coexisting with several other organizations, is coexisting with the schools, with the governments and with several other things. So any reality is experienced in entirely different ways by different people – the different identities that are working there.

There have to be multiple visions of history. You cannot escape this basic fact.

Therefore, there have to be multiple visions of history. You cannot escape this basic fact. That we all experience the same reality, or we all construct the same reality through different lenses is a fact we cannot get away from. It, therefore, needs multiple visions.

Now, if multiple visions is a reality that I cannot escape, what happens to the project of objectivity? If the Partidar Samaj sees it one way, the Gond community in another and the Dalit community in yet another, then is there a common reality? Can we arrive at a common reality at all?

Empathy and Dialogue in History-Writing

My answer to that is somewhere inherent in Kabir's statement – that unless you are able to develop the vision

of different people, understand what others feel and put yourself in others' shoes and developing the perspective, you cannot transcend your subjectivity. To transcend subjectivity and reach a relative level of objectivity, the only way we have is to negotiate with multiple subjectivities. He has a point of view, he has a point of view and he has a point of view – I need to engage with those different points of view. And without putting them together, I cannot transcend my own subjective viewpoint.

So the project of History is stated in Kabir's line. A peer is a master – a master of transcendental knowledge. You cannot attain that transcendental knowledge unless you have got a perception of the pain of the neighbour – the Other – whoever you are constructing as your Other. You can say that we are the Indian nation and we are fighting the British nation. So you have to understand what is going on there – what is their perspective? Unless you put that perspective and your perspective together, you cannot transcend your own subjectivity.

So dealing with subjectivities is very central to the issue of History. So how do we do this?

So dealing with subjectivities is very central to the issue of History. So how do we do this? How do we engage in this project of understanding other subjectivities and trying to arrive at a common perception? That again is through the process of dialogue.

So dialogue is another methodology. If I say methodology one is negotiating subjectivities, then methodology two is dialogue. I cannot write history if I am not prepared for dialoguing. I have to dialogue with a number of perceptions. But even before that, I have to dialogue with the sources. So I am going with a certain understanding to the sources. So first, I have to establish a dialogue with the sources and I have to establish a dialogue with other perceptions and other perspectives of a particular reality.

So without building in a process of dialogue, I cannot write history.

There is a third issue here, which is that the project of history – the way it is done professionally – is a highly rational activity. It is a rigorous and rational activity. But the lacunae is that, the more I engage in a technical rigorous process, the more I distance myself from what has been termed here as a pain (peer).

Therefore, I think what Kancha Ilaiah was trying to argue today has a different kind of meaning also, that you have to enter the process of creation – the process of labour which creates. The process of labour which creates goods, which creates pleasure, which creates pain – that process of generation has to be internalized by the historian through some way. You have to be able to re-live the basic process of creation – whether it is the creation of goods or whether it is the creation of other things – you have to mentally engage with that process.

The project of history – the way it is done professionally – is a highly rational activity. It is a rigorous and rational activity.

And that gives you a basic Sensuality. You cannot write about human affairs if you divest yourself from the basic Sensuality of being human. Being sensual, being active, being creative – this is central to being human. And if we lose sight of this basic process, we constantly go away into something else. And we will be producing rigorous histories, but they will not be human histories.

These (referring to Shankara and Kabir's couplets) are the more central things which historians have to learn to practice that profession. Having said that, I will come back to this issue of – how is the craft practised. But, how to interpret the sources – how to work it out – is

something you can always learn. If you don't learn, there will be a peer group which will beat you up to learn it.

The Methods, Process and Validation of History-Writing

Now let me quickly tell you how we validate ourselves. In all areas of History, there are rules of how you use the evidence. And they have been developed into very elaborate technical disciplines in themselves. There is a field called epigraphy which goes into how inscriptions are written – how they are composed, how they are carved, how the letters are formed etc. Then there are some disciplines around it like lithography. Then again there is archaeology, which is an extremely elaborate and rigorous process, where you have to know how to dig, how to interpret, how to record. If I want to use a text like this, there are very developed processes for textual criticism on how do I authenticate that text, how are different texts compared and how are different texts interpreted?

Now, every stage of history-writing develops certain norms for interpretation. Facts have to be strung together through an interpretation to tell a story.

And a historian cannot violate the rules by which these are done. You have to abide by them and you have to also depend upon the experts in those fields.

Interpretation and Norms

Now, every stage of history-writing develops certain norms for interpretation. A historian recovers a set of what you call facts. But the facts do not tell a story by themselves. The facts have to be strung together through an interpretation to tell a story.

I will give you an example. When in my younger days the family suspected that I got political, there was a lot of tension in the family. But one uncle who thought it was a good thing to do once advised me – the police will follow you and they will interrogate you also; but please remember that they have all the facts about you. They know what time you went where, what shop you entered, what person you met, which house you visited – which college – and which film you went to see. But they don't know what happened. And they will try to find out what happened by asking you. Only you can tell them what happened. They do not know. They just know that you went there. But they don't know the significance of your visit to that place.

So to put together all these discreet facts, – either you have to have inside information or you have to use your imagination and interpret them. If I start making those connections, there will be a peer group which will tell me that this is not done – this is not History. But whenever you raise new questions, they cannot be answered with an old set of rules.

So, those rules have to be redefined, rewritten and reworked. And you have to again dialogue and negotiate them with the established pundits of the profession why those rules cannot capture this history. That I have a new kind of source; I have a new kind of question. And to open up those new kinds of questions, I need new norms for interpretation. I cannot work with those old norms.

But what those new norms will be – will they be valid? How much liberty can I take with them? This again has to be established through a professional process. I can't just say anything that comes to my mind. So that has to be built through a process.

Processing and Building the Interpretation

Okay, now what does it mean? What are those processes that we normally would do? Like (when I get this text), the first thing that I will be asked is – please fix a chronology of this text. When was it written? What does it refer to – what events does it refer to?

The first thing that I will be asked is – please fix a chronology of this text. The second thing that has to be done is decoding the text.

The second thing that has to be done is decoding the text. What is the text trying to say? What is the symbolism used in it? What is the implicit message and explicit message? But more important than this is what we call a critical assessment of this source. How useful is it for the question that I am asking? That assessment has to be done in terms of – is it authentic? How close is it to the event I am talking about – the people I am talking about? What are the motives by which it was written or produced? What was the chance by which it was preserved?

If I am an archaeologist, this issue of chance preservation becomes very important. Because, most important things of that culture may be totally lost. But what survives is some very chancy meaningless stuff of that society, which may survive. And we may start imagining that this particular thing – which has survived by some freak accident – is central to that culture; because that's all that I have about this culture.

For example, take the Vedic texts. Now, the Vedic texts, we all know. If you just imagine today, in the society in which we live, there are some priests who conduct religious rituals. They have some manuals and rituals centred around that. Now, how much of importance will I give to that text in understanding today's world? I would rather go for WikiLeaks, or I would go for various other things rather than run after a panditji's text.

But imagine a society about whom you only have the panditji's pothi. You have to, therefore, understand the limitation of the source that you actually managed to grapple with. Like this Gond text - what is it? It is something which survived in the memory; and it was incorporated into the later identity assertions of this community. So how much can it actually tell me about that society or time or issue I am talking about? So you have to establish a critical assessment of that particular source – whatever source.

Then comes the processing of the information – you know, whatever information you have got on it, like I talked about today what we all cross-checked. The only so-called historical information I get is that there are these chaps called Hirdayshah and Pemalshah. So I scan the Mughal sources and I find that there is a reference to this particular king somewhere. So this cross-checking of possible contemporary or near-contemporary sources can help me to make sense of that text. So this kind of cross-checking process is very critical there.

Then I have to try and get all possible texts that tell me something about that event/period/society. I cannot be selective when I am beginning. I have to try and get as much as possible of all the information.

Then comes this connection-making, as I said. Once I have done all this professional checking of information, collection, collation and everything, I got those pegging points. Then I start making the connections between the points. Again, there are rules and there are patterns which I am using. Those patterns are derived from my earlier study of history, of other societies, of other similar contexts, etc. So I am basically transposing those patterns onto this and trying to make those linkages.

Then I have to try and get all possible texts that tell me something about that event/period/society. I cannot be selective when I am beginning.

Now, finally, having done all this, the main process that finally remains is that I have to present it before a peer group of historians for their review and validation. And unless that process is complete, I cannot go out into the public and claim that look, or publish a newspaper article that, I have found out this.

The Questions We ask of History

Nilanjan: My discomfort was that there are large tracts of history which are the truth. And there is no question of a viewpoint on it. I mean, Hitler gassed six million Jews. Whatever source you take, whatever evidence you take, you know he gassed six million Jews. There may be some disputes as to why he gassed them. There the Jews may have one point of view and the Germans may have another point of view.

My follow-up question is therefore this whole point about viewpoints and lenses and frames – is it applicable to certain periods of human history or is it applicable to cultures where you don't have extensive documents?

When you have a case like the Gonds, where they don't have any written history, if you want to create a history of the Gonds, you are forced to fall upon fables and myths and fairy tales and therefore cross-check with n number of sources. But I am sure there are, many kinds of human history or many cultures where there is hard evidence available from multiple sources, from which you can glean out certain hard facts and say that these are the objective truths – are there not?

Subbu: I can tell you – re-tell – the problem. See, I have looked at the history of Germany and fascism and I have

constructed this history where the gassing of six million Jews is central to the theory. That's fine. But there can be another vision of history. Like, the RSS has a totally different vision of that history. They would tell you that it was such a glorious rule which was able to establish great roads and a hundred per cent employment and built the glory of the German nation where liquidating six million Jews is probably a footnote there, or not even there. Now that is equally true. But my problem is – what kind of history are we promoting? And what kind of questions we are asking about that period have to be talked about and thought about.

Today I am talking about the Jews. Tomorrow I will have to engage with this question – what about the autobahn's meaning? What is the meaning of that industrialization – that hundred per cent employment that Germany went through? And did it, or did it not, force Germany to go into the war machine? And was waging war a central and essential consequence of that kind of economic development?

And did it, or did it not, force Germany to go into the war machine? And was waging war a central and essential consequence of that kind of economic development?

The question is not - what was the gas used. That can be established, as probably a lot of people have done. Could Germany have escaped the trauma of having to kill Jews? Could Germany have escaped the trauma of having to wage a world war? Was it because of this decision of the German nation or German people or German leadership that we will choose the fascist path? That is the question we have to ask.

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Teaching Social Studies at Centre For Learning

Venkatesh Onkar

Teaching Social Studies at Centre For Learning

Venkatesh Onkar

We are talking about ... schools cultivating in the young that most 'subversive' intellectual instrument – the anthropological perspective. This perspective allows one to be part of [one's] own culture and, at the same time, to be out of it. One views the activities of [one's] own group as would an anthropologist, observing its tribal rivals, its fears, its conceits, its ethnocentrism. In this way, one is able to recognize when reality begins to drift too far away from the grasp of the tribe. We need hardly say that achieving such a perspective is extremely difficult, requiring, among other things, considerable courage. We are, after all, talking about achieving a high degree of freedom from the intellectual and social constraints of one's tribe...

Teaching as a Subversive Activity
Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

Educational curricula over the ages, whether defined formally or informally, within the home or at school, have their roots in a very simple yet profoundly important question: what kind of capacities are we looking to nurture in children through education? What kinds of skills, abilities and attitudes do we hope will deepen as a result of our support as adults? At CFL, a small semi-residential school outside Bangalore, we have the unique opportunity to explore this question with both parents and children in close and intimate and yet rigorous ways.

Particularly with regard to history, we need to examine the way the past constructs the social present and the ways in which the ideologies of the present are used to read the past.

Thinking about the social studies provides an ideal way in which to focus the challenge of our educational intent at CFL. Social studies curricula, and indeed the overall educational project, should, we feel, nurture the capacity for analysis, for critical thinking and the weighing of evidence, all framed by the ability to empathize deeply with the experience of those very different from ourselves. We should, ideally, gain the ability to clearly question social messages that bombard us from all sides: messages that tell us about our identity, who we are in terms of race, class, gender and religion, that define us vis a vis social others. Particularly with regard to history, we need to examine the way the past constructs the social present and the ways in which the ideologies of the present are used to read the past. Finally, and most importantly, we believe, such questioning should lead us inwards into our psyche, into the very processes of identity formation itself, and its social consequences in terms of division and conflict, the sense of "self" and "other."

This broad framework of "critical thought" is one backdrop against which we run our school and educational programmes. And yet, critical thought for us is itself grounded in deeper questions regarding the responsible relationship between self and society. How is self and society intimately embedded in one another, and how are we to deepen our understanding of this mutuality? Are the specific social orientations we are now accustomed to the only ones available, or are there other fundamentally deeper and more peaceful relationships and structures that are possible? Obviously these are not questions that can be contained within some abstract "history curriculum" tucked away in a teacher's mind, but are rather vital and important questions that permeate all aspects of our social and personal lives.

Through close readings of such complex and multi-faceted sources, children come to see the role of interpretation in constructing historical "fact," and the ways in which such interpretations build our sense of the present.

In the abstract, such questions are all very well, but how do we explore them within our curriculum? A lot of our emphasis is on the constructed nature of social reality, both historical and contemporary; an easy point for the adult intellect to grasp, perhaps, but one that needs to be patiently explored in all its ramifications with students. A simple way to do this in a history class is to show children differing source material dealing with the same events: colonial encounters are an interesting and rich possibility. Through close readings of such complex and multi-faceted sources, children come to see the role of interpretation in constructing historical "fact," and the ways in which such interpretations build our sense of the present.

To consolidate the point, we can offer children many alternative explanations for historical phenomena. As an example, we study the Indus Valley civilization in middle school (around 6th grade). One of the sub themes is the collapse of the Indus Valley culture. We can explore various explanations with children: was the collapse due to economic causes? Climate change? The depletion of natural resources? What exactly is the strength of the "Aryan invasion" hypothesis? Each of these "explanations" comes with its own logic, the outlines of which even young students can enjoy and engage with. Through such lines of questioning and evidence, children (as young as eleven and twelve) come to appreciate the complexity of the problem as well as the biases from which we are tempted to construct solutions.

Sources need not be rooted in the deep past. A study of lakes and tanks in Bangalore, for instance, taken up by our senior students, reveals the layered and complex nature of the city as it is today, as well as the way it is viewed by different groups in society, each with their own specific interests. Students

interviewed fishermen whose livelihoods depended in part on fishing rights in the lakes, and discussed the ways in which these rights had been diminished by the privatization of lakes. They also spoke to residents (of various social backgrounds) who lived in the neighbourhood of the lakes regarding their perceptions of the role of the lakes in the socio-economic life of the city. They documented conversations with researchers and NGOs who worked in the field of water resource management, urban planning, urban ecology etc. All of this was framed by a study of historical colonial accounts of the construction and usage of lakes. Through this process, it became quite clear that various competing interests colour both the construction of social reality as well as its interpretation. A simple walk through the city's historical Market area, which our middle school students do as part of a "Bangalore project," reveals as much, albeit in a simpler form.

In a more abstract fashion, through an understanding of social institutions (marriage, the family, religion, the media), children do get a glimpse of the relative nature of these constructs, as well as the urge in themselves and others to take these constructs as the truth, the way of creating social arrangements. We spend a lot of time with children (and among ourselves as adults) in trying to understand this urge within ourselves to define a particular aspect of social reality and to psychologically identify ourselves with it, simultaneously perceiving the institution as defining "us" and our sense of identity: a mysteriously circular process.

A theoretical knowledge of the constructs that surround us is one thing, but to gain an intimate understanding, both for ourselves as teachers and for the students, we find that a deep experiential approach is vital. It is only when we actually engage directly with the people who face the brutal constraints of various social structures that we appreciate the power of their impact. In other words, our social studies curriculum tries to emphasize a sensitivity to the lived experiences of others, in very practical terms, in the hope that this might lead to a very different conception of social relationships and responsibilities among young people.

One example is a module on human rights that the senior students studied some time ago. The idea behind this course was to study the abstract conceptions of a rights based approach to social equality: its history as well as its expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, our students also engaged (with a fair level of depth) with individuals who faced discrimination in daily life: people with disabilities, other children with no access to education, slum-dwellers with no secure housing and so on. This study, and documentation, went on for several months. Similar processes take place on our annual excursions, which can last fifteen to twenty days. For example, high school students (grades 9 and 10) travelled some months ago in the Western Ghats and one part of their excursion was an attempt to understand issues surrounding mining in the region: both the social and the environmental impact of the mines. Such engagement with these dimensions of social reality cannot always be confined within the walls of a traditional classroom nor indeed within the framework of traditional "schooling."

When middle and upper middle class children, from privileged backgrounds, engage with "the disempowered", doesn't the encounter smack of condescension?

The question of the direct engagement with others of very different social locations raises a potentially troubling question. When middle and upper middle class children, from privileged backgrounds, engage with "the disempowered", doesn't the encounter smack of condescension? Isn't there an element of voyeurism in this exchange? Rather, we have found that these experiences, coupled with some knowledge and background, do evoke understanding and a sense of connection. They are not treated lightly by students. These kinds of experiences seem to lead young people to emphasize the similarities between themselves and social "others" rather than differences. The capacity for empathy, when evoked, seems often to override the power equations implicit in such engagements.

I have tried to develop a few strands of our thinking behind history and, more broadly, social studies, at CFL. We feel that it is the process of gathering evidence and analysing it which is most important in a social studies or history classroom. Our emphasis is on discussion, on open-ended enquiry rather than fixing explanations through ideologies, and on finding empathic responses to social issues, both the everyday as well as the structural. The process of analysis and the learning of critical skills are more important to us than heavy content. Of course, my selective approach above doesn't convey a complete picture. I have left out significant strands in the material we study (geography, for example), as my emphasis was on a description of a curricular philosophy rather than specific content or skills. The brief pictures I have given are of course based on a curricular framework that tries to systematically build both skills and content; the courses the children study are not randomly chosen.

The mood of investigation cannot obviously be contained within an abstract "social studies curriculum." The intellectual and emotional life of the school, of the entire learning environment, should ideally support and nurture this sceptical energy. It then becomes possible to see many aspects of daily living as well as intellectual enquiry as part of a project of self-understanding and of understanding others.

One of the questions I had begun with was that of a responsible relationship between self and society. There is no guarantee at all that any curriculum, or any set of experiences, will guide us, adults and children, into responsible thought and action. Yet it is our hope that, through dialogue, through a patient and rigorous investigation of the psychological and social currents of everyday life, and through frameworks that emphasize empathy and compassion, we can gain deep insights about society and ourselves (and the relationships between the two) that are fundamentally transformative in nature.

Vignettes —
Collective Reflection on History and Education

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The Basis for Identity Building in History

Manish: There is a difference in description in the natural sciences and social sciences. When one breaks up a larger question into smaller questions in natural sciences or mathematics, the definiteness still allows one to answer smaller things and then they can be inductively put together to answer a larger question.

Where does History differ here? History is a description about human relationships, lives, institutions and collectivities. So whether you explain an angle wrongly as a right angle or left angle or wrong angle, it does not impact the distribution of resources and creation of identities. But the manner in which one describes collectivities and the past can affect social relationships.

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Hardy: There has always been a dominant mainstream whose history was considered more valuable than the rest. Now because of the fact that different voices have become important, many histories have also become important. History is a construction of identity – where one comes from, what one is. And anything that includes a larger identity is more acceptable to a larger number of people.

Kancha Ilaiah's discussion about the Bahujan view of History and how they look at Gandhi clearly shows that any nationalist history which looks at Gandhi in a certain

way is not acceptable to them. Perhaps there is no quarrel about the facts or the methodology. But the quarrel is about the lens that is used. So the lens is very important, and determines what is seen and what remains unseen.

It is important to recognize the fact that one looks at things with a specific lens – the lens that one is constituted of and one wants to constitute. So it is the preferred identity and, in that sense, an extremely political exercise of writing History, which is perhaps distinct from science or mathematics, where those kinds of questions are not so significant.

Multiplicity of Perspectives

Suhel: If everybody looks at historical events and their interpretation with their own lenses, then there are six billion or more lenses. That means there are six million or more jobs for historians – which is very nice for historians, but doesn't necessarily inspire confidence in what these different lenses say.

Manish: The assumption here is that lenses change with each individual. When historians talk about lenses, they do not mean individual subjectivities and lenses arising from those, but lenses which bring into picture a set of questions about certain social groups and beings.

There can be a variety of lenses, and new lenses may develop. Earlier, ecology may not have been a concern; but now it is a lens to look at certain things.

Hardy: This question of lenses should not be reduced to a caricature of individual lenses. It is not about going somewhere and seeing something. The lens is a serious question of identity related to politics and to the social

status of groups. It is related to questions of the fight and struggle for power. So the question of lenses should not be trivialized. It is far more serious than how one perceives something.

Shaji: Social movements – the environmentalist movement, feminist movement, etc – force historians to look at history in a new way and create a new set of more inclusive History textbooks. A new set of historians emerge from each and every social movement. New interpretations come to the mainstream. Older historians like E Sridhar Menon are changing their positions and each new edition carries more additional pages.

It is not that historians are picking a particular lens and looking at history. What is happening in society necessitates the historians to look at history in a particular way. In this whole process, more dialogue happened and contributed to democratize old discussions of society. Social movements really played a big role.

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Venu: The fact that the various ways in which one understands the world have lost certainty and don't give one single authoritative picture need not be a matter of despair. Losing one comprehensive framework of understanding, one is not let loose in a sea of relativity or relativism. The reason is – the world is increasingly a reflection of human concerns and human intentions, and not an unmediated natural raw world to be discovered and understood. At one level, it is an arrangement of material objects, but they are also reflections of human culture and human intentions. Arguably, there is very little of the raw, unmediated world available to most of the alleged six billion different lenses. Almost everything is a reflection of human nature.

Method of the Historian

Suhel : Is there any movement or perception that when somebody constructs a story out of the evidence that they have gathered, they also specify what evidence would disprove or negate their story?

Manish : It is not that there is no space for refusal in History. But refusal can happen at two levels. One, at the level of facticity – the facts and evidence used are wrong, or new evidence brings in a new dimension, which gives a new colour to the coherence or connections drawn earlier.

The other factor which can question why these things are wrong is dependent on the perspective employed. For example, if in a certain narration, it is evident that Ram is maryaada purshottam, the new evidence on what he did to Sudras (Jambu) and to Sita raises a new set of questions. The questions one poses lead to new sources. Otherwise one may have questions, but no answers. History remains a discipline of evidence.

Values and the Basis for Dialoguing

Sreekanth: Why was there no mention of values anywhere? In a book called The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy, Hilary Putnam says that if natural sciences are based on facts, drilling down into the method of establishing a fact exposes a set of values.

There are epistemic values, like the value of coherence. Coherence and consistency are the kinds of values that help establish a fact. Behind the focus of facts in natural science, there are may be more than values, but there are surely values.

Any talk about subjectivity and over-focus on that aspect leads in the direction of six billion lenses coloured by values. A discourse at the level of values could have a value of equity behind it. There was mention of an ecological perspective. There could be a value of sustainability behind that kind of thinking.

One historical question is, was there a complete failure of ethical discourse in the past? One is at a level where normativity is not touched upon. One does not want to say what another person is supposed to do, and the freedom to do what one wants to do is therefore maintained. If that is the level that society has reached, is that why value discourse is no more done? Or is it in ignorance?

Hardy: The problem with values is that they reflect a political assertion and also identity assertion. So what and whose values does one consider? There can be values like the value of coherence. Articulation and effective presentation are more valuable than being able to talk to people nicely. So the question of values is not without value.

The problem is the fight about which values are more meaningful than others. Each social movement brings in new questions to the values of equity – what is considered valuable. What one sees today is the battle of what will emerge as a set of values which a larger set of people will accept. So it can be an acceptance by choice, or by hegemony and domination. What has happened so far is that we have accepted a certain sub-conscious hegemonization. That is why we have one History. And that is being challenged.

Teaching History

Suhel: The answer to the question: 'Why teach History?' comes from a comment about applied History. Why teach anything at all? One reason – maybe a small reason – to teach something is because it is true. For example, when teaching students about the solar system, the fact that Mars is a small, hot planet and Venus is a large, cold planet does not necessarily impact anyone or make a person a better citizen or more functional in life. But it is true.

For example, children are taught that humans evolved in Africa and spread out to all corners of the globe. It may not be relevant, but it is true. One might say this is great – humans evolved as one species in one place and then spread over; so that shows the brotherhood of mankind. And one's political agenda becomes clear. Does that mean that if there was later evidence that humans did not really evolve in Africa, but separately in different continents and were not all one brotherhood, then would one pretend that wasn't the case? Would that not be taught?

Distinguishing between History and anything else as fact and truth, as parable or fable teaches one how to live. Both are important. These are small parts of why teaching happens. A part of one's knowledge is not because it is useful, but because it is true. Truth is important because it sets the imagination free.

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Otherwise, why teach that humans evolved in Africa and spread throughout the globe? It is wonderful – it is beautiful. And once imagination is set free, the boundaries one needs to put on one's imagination become defined. So one is free to imagine all kinds of worlds and all kinds

of possibilities; but to uncover what has really happened, imagination needs to be constrained and subjected to evidence and various things like that. So a part of what is done is because it is there and it is true – not simply to mould young minds.

Sriparna: A student of History grows up studying History as facts with only one interpretation. So while teaching History, one of the things to value is including the method historical inquiry which rarely happens in classrooms.

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Unless children are given the opportunity to experience that inquiry – not just look at the textbook or what is given to them as the Bible, but to be able to question it and be able to interpret sources, the teaching of History is incomplete. While doing that, one needs to become comfortable with the fact that there could be many interpretations to a fact or an incident, or ways of looking at things.

The only way one can be objective is to be open to these multiple perspectives, and for the children to realize how difficult it is to come to one conclusion/answer. So instilling that tentativeness of the creation of knowledge is important.

Usha: An historical artefact is not a problem in itself, It's a challenge – figuring out what the artefact represents, how it was created and so on. If, for instance one displays a pot in a History classroom, what are the stories that can be told around it? Delving into who made it, who asked for it to be made, where was it displayed and so on lead to different perspectives.

The fact that artefacts are open to question is the method of History. And to turn it from something that makes

the study imperfect to something that makes the study challenging, interesting and open-ended is what makes History alive to children and converts it from something boring to something interesting.

Anjali: On the question of 'Why study History ?' various approaches need to be looked at. Why not study integrated social sciences? The limited time in a year raises the issue of selection of topics. With integrated topics, why study the Mahabharat period or the prehistoric period, and in what sequence? The prehistoric period could show when and how human beings made tools, or when language developed, as a thematic approach.

Is something lost in this process? The issues discussed are all for an integrated social science approach which incorporates both space and time. The new History textbooks also follow a chronological approach – Class Six has Ancient India, Class Seven has Medieval India and Class Eight has Modern India. Historians do take up themes.

Conversely, can the historical approach help determine time of different events and determine sequence in a thematic approach?

Venu: There are at least three aspects of what an educational practice could do to bring in this kind of complexity of understanding and a welter of unavoidable perspectives.

One is epistemic – the matter of doubt. Students need not be introduced to a set of facts. It is the nature of doubt as a stance. In science, as in human endeavours, doubt is a very valuable attitude. If science can give certainty, or a particular scientific approach provides something, the

student should have the sensibility to remember that science is quintessentially a social enterprise. It didn't come about abruptly by some kind of unmediated act of god. The discovery of a drug, for instance, has behind it structures of power which are fundamentally human.

The second is the fact that it is human to attribute a moral dimension to everything one does. While history itself may not be constructed morally, what historians do has a moral dimension. Therefore education has to highlight that and invite the student to engage with the fact that all knowledge has an ethical dimension.

The third, maybe most arguable and contentious point is that students need to be invited to place themselves and understand themselves as human beings – not as entities placing themselves in the social dimension through a process of reflection. There is no escape from inviting a student to understand his/her being in the world. Having spent tremendous energy on the world, they should understand what it means to be in that world.

If one really taught Social Studies in the way it should be done, wouldn't it be naïve to assume that an inquiring student would not relate their thoughts in the classroom to their immediate environment?

Reshmi: If one really taught Social Studies in the way it should be done, wouldn't it be naïve to assume that an inquiring student would not relate their thoughts in the classroom to their immediate environment, even if one did it vicariously and did not use local contexts all the time? What happens after that, when this awareness creates situations of counter-pressure from the community or certain sections of society? To pretend that one was a good teacher of Social Studies and not spark off a question in a child's mind to the point where it would go back to the community and question the status quo would be shying away from the reality of what one's teaching should do.

Usha: One cannot understate or ignore the importance of presenting a received History. Unless children know the received History, they cannot challenge it. So just as we continue to teach standard language even though there are many ways of using language, it is important for a child to be presented with 'Okay, this is what people say is true. It has been constructed in this manner, and it is up to you to question it and see whether it holds'. So History cannot always be entirely thematic or entirely process-oriented. There has to be content.

In the Classroom

Arun: There is a huge difference between History textbooks twenty years ago and the NCERT textbooks that are available now. Subjectively speaking, this is more interesting – an improvement on previous textbooks, with richer material being presented. The words perspectives, ethics, morality, all come down to the fact that a new History textbook actually talks about Dalits also. That is a wonderful thing. The new textbooks have lots of pictures, are not date-based, and seem to be much better – much more interesting.

Just because it is better, it does not help a person become a better human being. Grown-ups already know what goes on in society. Knowing that there is a Dalit thing does not necessarily make one empathetic to it. But not knowing about it, cannot lead to the next stage of evoking the empathy. In that way, the textbook is more inclusive, but it does not lead to more empathy, or to a change in world views. But the fact that seems obvious is that the people who wrote this book had empathy.

Kanupriya: History becomes a very powerful emotional space for children from families where the situation is very complex – children who live in both rural and urban poverty – because it addresses the question of various aspects of their identity: Who am I, Who are you, Where are we now and Where are we going?

Tracing children's migrant identities becomes a powerful experience. The same thing applies in the rural context – tracing the roots of one's village school, which is never written about in any textbook. In most maps in one's textbook, one's village never exists. These processes make History an emotional experience; because identity and emotions are very closely connected.

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Kinnari: Why does one study History in the first place? History has different lenses through which it has been seen and analyzed and presented in the text by historians. But what does it do for a child? It gives the child a lens to to see the world.

Seeing it from a constructivist paradigm that is now applicable to most classrooms, the idea of History as a discipline and how it has been teacher-taught in a didactic manner as compared to a more integrated current approach makes a teacher's job very difficult.

The film Young Historians by Deepa Dhanraj reflects how it is possible to turn young children into historians through very simple means of engaging them in the process of selection of a source and analyzing it. The interpretations the children bring in from the backgrounds they come from highlights how they see the village or the place they are living in.

It is a complex process, but possible. But where does one draw the line between disciplinary teaching of history

and creating historians versus integrating subjects, which a lot of project-based methods are doing today?

Illustrations

Rishikesh: It has been mentioned that History is boring and difficult for children. Fifteen years ago, the first History workshop for students I conducted had one objective – that there are multiple perspectives to things. Children need to be aware of and appreciate that there are multiple perspectives. It is dangerous to get into which perspective is more right and things like that. That was the time when the Kashmir militancy was into its sixth year and in the newspapers almost daily. So this issue of connecting history to the present was something I was tackling at the same time.

What I used to do was to draw this northern part of the country and ask kids what it was. Of course, for everyone, it was clearly Kashmir. In the papers, there was always this PoK map. When I drew that and asked what it was called, the response was PoK. Then the issue of 'occupied' Kashmir would come in.

So we would get into this whole thing of whether this was really the truth and the only perspective that one could have. And then the discussions would go into the aspect of how the north-west part of the map is known as azad Kashmir, or free Kashmir. So immediately, a different, almost opposite lens would come into play – one of being considered 'occupied' and the same being considered 'free' by our neighbours. The discussion would continue in this manner and touch upon the history of Kashmir and so on. But what about what the Kashmiris felt? Was it really free or occupied?

So these discussions yielded no answer as such. It did convert History into a bit of excitement, though, and children didn't find it difficult to get into this. But the question of six billion lenses did come in. Children would ask: there are forty of us – can each of us bring about something which would be our own history or our own understanding of it? As long as evidence can stand scrutiny and get validated by experts, then of course one could write one's own history.

Hardy: One needs space, time and knowledge to function as a scientist. To do a structured task, one has to know what kind of History – historical method or historical ways of arriving at a consensus about what can be written – emerges. But to be considered a young historian, one requires knowledge which is not always possible to have.

There is also the need to separate these two questions – what teachers in certain contexts can do, the freedom they have and the way they can use the freedom, and what a larger structure, which has a defined curriculum and a defined textbook – and maybe a defined, mandatory teacher-training program – can do.

Rohit: Many have suggested how to go back in time, corroborate different evidence and weigh them against each other, have different perspectives, etc. Probably children, by the Fourth or Fifth standard, can do a lot on those lines and, in the process, acquire some historical knowledge and use it to understand the world around them.

To distinguish between social knowledge – social sciences – and History, most of the social sciences, deal with societies which have a possibility of interaction. History deals with the lives of people with whom one

has no possibility of interaction. Therefore, necessarily, one imposes one's frameworks and purposes on them. The psychology of the people are assumed according to one's understanding of human beings today, while the psychologies and purposes of Akbar or Ashoka might have been very different. Understanding that and making social sense of it is what is called developing historical sense – how changes occur and societies flow in a certain direction.

There could be very simple episodes or very simple things which take one into this realm. At one time, they developed loads of these small things, and some of them just occur. For instance, on a picnic a student discovered some shells of a pot in a rainwater drain. That led to whether there was a village, who lived there where they went and why, and of what use was this pot?

Unfortunately, in the shells of the pot, there was also a round metal object. When we asked around, the answers did not fit into any of our theories because the village had moved – people didn't live there for about sixty years. So this small chilla triggered many theories to explain it. Understanding these processes and making sense is much more useful than having a load of historical facts.

A closing remark

Venu: Like Neeladri talked about the historians losing their innocence as professionals, as teachers and educators, I think it will be true to say that our own discussions are a process of losing the innocence – if we had any – in this process of dialogue and inquiry .