

FILLING-IN SOME VOIDS**HARBANS MUKHIA, FORMERLY AT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY, NEW DELHI**

The study of Indian history in general and the medium of Indology in particular gives us a point of entry into a very limited, elite version of Indian society and Brahmanical culture, primarily accessible through Sanskrit, though other Indian languages were gradually added on. Both admiration as well as denunciation of it was predicated upon its *difference* from Europe. The rapidly evolving perspectives of history writing in India, as elsewhere in the world over the past few decades, encompass much wider swathes of society; consequently, the memories of the past in these segments also become objects of historical study. The methods of recovering these memories go beyond texts and archaeology; fieldwork is becoming an important input.

The whole of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth was marked by two contrasting images, both created in Europe: that of the dynamic west, energised by science and reason and that of the static orient, possessed of culture and spirituality but devoid of rationality as Europe understood it.

As post-Enlightenment Europe posited its search for the rational in opposition to what it conceived of as ‘the dark ages’ in the preceding era when superstition – its favoured term for religion and religiosity in any form – reigned, it inaugurated a *longue durée* transmutation of human history. The assumption of the superiority of its rationality to what had preceded it, and the assumption of its ultimate universal triumph, was powerfully reinforced by the rise and dominance of positivism in the west (and by extension in the rest of the world) over the nineteenth century and nearly two thirds of the twentieth. Positivism derived its legitimacy from science, which was premised on a dichotomy between an objective reality and the subjective perception of it. The objective reality was given; it could at best be apprehended through incremental knowledge and utilised for convenience, but was immune from human intervention and was immutable. As science, in opposition to intuitive religion, its validity was subject to demonstrable verification or falsification and its objectivity was universal. These characteristics would ensure its ultimate, universal triumph over all pre-rational, pre-scientific forms of knowledge. The rise of modern science, technology, industry, capitalism and individualism are parts of this ensemble which is predicated upon the notion of universal validity and irreversible universal triumph.¹

¹ The premise of the unfolding of a universal rationality, which binds all of human history into one thread, and which will ultimately vanquish all that is irrational, itself imbibes the assumptions of Christian theology which was predicated upon the universal triumph of Christianity through the unfolding of divine will in history. The counterpositioning of the rational vs. the irrational also runs parallel to the counterpositioning of god’s own

It was against this backdrop of the pervasive dominance of positivism, on the foregrounding of 'science' and 'rationality' in its universal triumphal march, that the notion of the oriental Other was born as its alter ego; Indology was the way to understanding this Other. It was a scientific endeavour to understand what was construed as unscientific. The Other could be charming to some or repulsive to others, but there was no getting away from the sharp demarcating lines between them, with no shared spaces. Throughout the nineteenth century, most influential thinkers in Europe, including giants like Hegel and Marx – engaged in tracing the trajectories of Europe's 'progress' and its driving force – insisted that India had 'no history', i.e., no 'real' (i.e., economic, technological or social) change through its several thousand years of antiquity. Even the mode of people's dress had not changed, concluded Montesquieu. Stasis as the high water mark of India's history stood in sharp contrast to the history of Europe, whose 'stages' of development were clearly enough discernible. Europe too had had its ups and downs, true; its medieval past comprised those 'dark ages' of regression; but ever since the Renaissance, it had never looked back. Europe, of course constituted one single entity in this analysis, even as the dynamic of 'progress' was largely located in western regions of it. Eastern Europe was treated as its fringe beneficiary, as it were, yet part of the whole.

There was another 'whole' too, much vaster in terms of reach of territory or human population and far more diverse, i.e., the Orient, which could find place only on an altogether distinct footing. Indology, as part of the study of this Orient, must employ a different set of criteria, to uncover its 'mysteries'.

We thus receive two images from the Europe of the nineteenth and a good part of the twentieth century, though starting much earlier: Dynamic Europe marked by science and reason and static India possessed of an ancient and unadulterated wisdom located in its religion and mythology – primarily Hinduism – and languages – primarily Sanskrit. This latter image too visualised Indian civilisation as originating in great antiquity and virtually retaining its pristine purity down to the present. Indeed some of the major figures of scholarship in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe, such as Herder and some of his disciples, firmly believed that human life itself had originated in Asia and all of human civilisation in India. The creators of these two images had little in common; yet one premise was common to all: the unchanging character of Indian history, culture and civilisation, especially its non-material constituents. The notion of the material west in contrast with the spiritual east was born of these postulates developed in Europe.

But spiritual India also called for a 'scientific' study, with methods developed by positivism: painstaking collection of exact data objectively analysed in order to infer unambiguous meanings from them. Acquiring mastery of 'scientific' knowledge of India's distinctive cultural and spiritual specificities became the object.

However, claims to the monopoly of science were not merely an intellectual quest in Europe. It also implicated an exercise of power, following the Baconian enunciation

truth revealed through Christ vs. all other religions or forms of religiosity. Europe was the locale of these encompassing developments in the medieval, early modern and modern centuries.

of 'Knowledge is power.' Constantly engraved in it was the notion of the Other, as in Christianity; science would investigate the subject, the Other, as an instrument of subjugation. It is in this quest that the concept of Indology flourished. Science claimed to get to the essence of phenomena and sought to construct an objective image of the reality. The notion that science itself comprised infirmities was a post-Einstein development. Einstein himself could never be convinced of infirmities in science. 'God', he had said, 'had played no dice with the universe'; that is, every little detail had a defined and objective place in the universe which science could unravel with certainty by capturing the essence of phenomena.

The image of the essence of India that impressed itself most powerfully on Indologists was that of Hinduism. Europe was not unfamiliar with Islam, even if its perception of Islam was marked by acute adversity going back to the Crusades. But Hindu religion, its mythology and its languages, especially Sanskrit, was what marked out its *difference* and therefore constituted India's *essence*. Even as other religions of India, barring Islam and Sikhism, and other languages also came to draw the attention of scholars and institutions, the primacy of Hinduism has remained nearly intact down the ages. In some ways, the advancement of Indology at the hands of western scholarship in western institutions of learning employing western methods of investigation liberated the study of India and allowed its growth into unexplored regions of research; on the other hand, it also became straitjacketed into the equation of 'India' with the layers of its elite culture, leaving out vast reaches and diversities of cultural patterns, quite besides the constantly evolving nature of all these cultural zones, contrary to the frozen images that both positivism and Indology had created. It left out the constantly evolving nature of India's economy, technology and social mores too from its purview. Indology thus created a very partial picture of the subject of its study in very many different ways, even as it imagined that it had captured the 'essence' of India. It thus left many voids in creating an image of India. It is to some of these voids that I would try to draw attention.

To begin with, with the changing power relations on a world scale, it is important to abandon the colonial baggage which had necessarily accompanied the evolution of Indology in Europe. It is interesting to note that even as Indian academia has accepted and adapted western modes of study of disciplines, be it in natural or social sciences or languages, Indology *per se* never found favour here. No Indian university or research institution boasts of a Department of Indology, although Departments of History, Archaeology, Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil etc. abound, as do Departments of several other related disciplines.

Equally important, as the tight stranglehold of positivism (of which Marxism was partly an inversion and largely an extension) comes under severe strain, and the notion that a 'scientific' study of societies and cultures can yield an unambiguous meaning faces acute challenge, space has opened for the accounting of diversities and multiplicities inherent in any society and culture. It is to these diversities and multiplicities that attention must be paid. 'Essence' can no longer suffice as an analytical category. One of the major transitions in the study of societies over the past few decades has been from the deployment of binary oppositions, whether of continuity vs. change or

class vs. class or empire vs. colony, etc. to one of continuums where interactions and interrelationships comprise the totality. It is against this background that the study of India, as of any other society, needs to cast a second look at itself.

An offshoot of this transition has been a move to include the medium of fieldwork, along with texts, for the study of a society; this opens a window, *inter alia*, onto popular perceptions of phenomena either excluded from the texts or included derisively. As has been observed above, the reach of popular perceptions is much more extensive than that of texts, and its reception by the populace is much wider than that of academia. Its premises are very different from those of academia, as is its worldview. Indeed, it would be futile to speak of one worldview at any plane of societal perceptions; there always are diverse views. But some differences could perhaps be marked. In popular construction of 'history', there is no sense of chronology or even of space, the two essential components of the profession of the historian. An event may happen any time in an instant or over unspecified thousands of years; usually no date is assigned to an event. Yet it provides a perspective that is very different from the one received from the academy or from the mainstream. Let us illustrate with some examples.

We are all familiar with the figure of the young Bhagat Singh, who invited the death penalty by throwing a smoke bomb in the Assembly Hall during the late Colonial regime in New Delhi, in April, 1929. The same building now functions as Independent India's Parliament. A young historian of Punjab, Ishwar Dayal Gaur, wished to go beyond the received image of Bhagat Singh and beyond the traditional divide between the nationalist and Marxist historiography of India's freedom struggle and engaged in some extensive fieldwork in his state, coalescing it with literary textual data. The results are fascinating. In the homes in Punjab, Bhagat Singh is seen as a bridegroom; that's his pervasive image. Gaur virtually opens his book with the endearing observation: 'The *party* or *official* or *nationalist* image of Bhagat Singh cannot be squared with the (so far unexplored) *people's* image of their martyr/hero' (Gaur, p. 10, emphasis in original). Bhagat Singh, in this narrative, figures in marriage songs (*ghoṛī*), *qissā* (popular stories told in verse form), *marhī* (funeral narratives), *bolī* (folk catch-songs), *ṭappe* (folk-composed couplets) and so forth. Immediately, Bhagat Singh is neither tied down to the bomb he had thrown, nor does he remain the distant figure who fought for India's freedom by inviting death for himself; he is an intimate member of every family, is every family's bridegroom. He becomes part of everyone's everyday life. This image is not susceptible to a positivist search for objective truth, nor does it cohere with the 'essence' of India, derived from Sanskrit; but its 'reality' persists in the cultural ambience which envelops his memory.

Indology also seems to be dead certain about the univocal meaning of the term 'Hindu' and by implication that of other religious identities, especially 'Muslim', perceived to be in a mutually exclusive, indeed adversarial relationship. In doing so it overlooks a host of literature that underlines the porous nature of these identities. Numerous studies of Sufi poetry and practices at Sufi *dargāhs*, medieval Bhakti poetry, lives of Bhakti saints, and the genre of poetry, the Urdu *ghazal*, all very evocative forms of popular culture, defy the drawing of firm boundaries around these denominations of

Hindu and Muslim. But such defiance goes beyond these forms. Ramya Sreenivasan brings to us two fascinating accounts of Sultan Alauddin Khalji's conquest of the Rajput kingdom of Jalor in 1311. The 'official' history of this conquest, as that of other conquests, is simple enough: the Rajput ruler had earlier submitted to the Sultan but had prevaricated in complying with the terms. The Sultan then invaded the territory and vanquished the unreliable feudatory.

The stories that Sreenivasan explores are not works of 'history', hence not quite open to 'historical' inquiry. Yet, they bring to the surface a different perspective. She explores two accounts in the regional languages of Gujarat and Rajasthan, written respectively around a century and a half and two centuries and a half after the event: the *Kanhadde Prabandh* and *Nainsī rī Khyāt*. The latter modifies a number of details of the former, but both relate the historically improbable story of the Sultan's elder daughter having fallen in love with the Prince of Jalor. She insisted on marrying him and even made her father agree to it, and committed *sati* when her 'husband' died in battle against her father (Srinivasan 2004, pp. 87–108). The symbolism that inheres in the stories is important and modifies the lessons we learn from hegemonic history: it is a lesson in counter-hegemony. It is not merely that a Hindu princess must be forced to marry a Muslim prince; it is not merely that a princess must have no say in her marriage; it is not merely that a vanquished ruler's daughter must be delivered into the harem of the victor; all of these values can be subverted, inverted in constructions of memory about a historical event. Sreenivasan then goes on to explore another medieval legend, that of Padminī – not the veracity of it, but the replication, modification and diffusion of the legend in different regions of India in different periods and in different contexts, including the context of India's freedom struggle (Sreenivasan 2007).

Very recently the oral traditions about the events of 1857 have been collected and analysed (Rag 2010). The received knowledge about the great Rebellion of that year tells us that the widespread economic exploitation of the Indian rulers, artisans and peasants had created a situation of grave tensions which erupted in an unprecedented uprising, although the immediate provocation was the greased cartridges which hurt the religious sensibilities of both Hindu and Muslim soldiers. The new book, based on extensive field- and archival work, shifts the focus from the arena of economy to that of culture: it wasn't the economic ruin, but 'it was as if their whole cultural world was invaded, its norms and ethics violated and traditionally revered systems were put in jeopardy.' Rag collects his data from folksongs, stories, and social customs as recorded in popular magazines and local histories. The heroes in these folksongs are not Rani Jhansi and Tantya Tope and the last Mughal, etc., but small local figures, Dukhnu Gontia, Sukko and Munni. The historians' obsession with the most visible figures is clearly not shared at the ground level. Yet, the memory of 1857 at that level is as much a reality as the one perpetuated through available textbooks.

In my own study of chiefly medieval Indian history, I was trained to treat the statements of European travellers to seventeenth and eighteenth century India relating to trade, the economy and technology with respect but overlook their observations regarding the scandals pertaining to the imperial court and the harem etc. These, one

thought, comprised salacious bazaar gossip, very far from reliable evidence. There is much weight in this derision. The tendency of European observers to stereotype Indians, especially Indian women, has been noted by several analysts (for example, Teltscher 1997). Yet, as I gradually realised, all the scandals about the ruling family and the court, empirically impossible to prove or disprove, do constitute a perspective. If the imperial records and histories are premised on the distance between 'us' (the rulers) and 'them' (the subjects), where the latter are inevitably looked upon very patronisingly, bazaar gossip, by ridiculing the rulers, is bridging the distance by treating the ruling families as fallible, vulnerable human beings, just like the subjects. The assumption that ruling class behaviour as role model is being entirely and unquestioningly emulated by subjects is clearly being questioned in the bazaar. Karl Marx's epic statement that 'the ruling ideology in any epoch is the ideology of the ruling class', even if enlarged to substitute 'culture' for ideology, is a classic *partial* view of society, although it had pervaded almost all variants of thought in nineteenth century Europe, continuing into the first half of the twentieth. Folktales almost everywhere are a constant, universal reminder of counter-hegemony. In folktales, the king is usually a knave, ruling with the good advice of an able counsellor, again mostly a commoner having risen high; his rise creates jealousy among fellow courtiers, who conspire to have him kicked out of the king's favour. But the kingdom begins to flounder and the king realises his error. However, he has lost touch with his counsellor, which he regains by setting up an impossible task which he knows his counsellor alone could carry out. In the end the king and the counsellor are united again and the kingdom retrieves its earlier glory. The priest, another powerful symbol of authority, also usually comes in for similar lampooning (Mukhia 1990).

There is another perspective too in folktales which give us their version of history. We know from 'official' history, for example, that the Mughal Emperor Bābur came and conquered India after fighting several battles with Indian rulers, among them two crucial ones: with Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat in 1526 and with Rāṇā Sāngā at Khanuā in 1527. It was thus that the Mughal empire in India was established and Bābur ruled over it until his death in 1530. The Italian traveller, Niccolao Manucci, who came to India hiding in a boat in 1656 and never returned, records what he believed was an absolute truth, but which was more like a folk tale. Bābur was fortunate to receive good advice from one Rangīl Dās – a clearly Hindu name – and his rule flourished. Then arose jealousy among the emperor's other courtiers, Rangīl Dās' ouster and his subsequent return etc. etc. (Manucci 1981, vol. I, pp. 110–11). What is remarkable in this tale is that Bābur is not depicted here as an alien conqueror, but as one whose rule has indigenous roots in the form of Rangīl Dās, who is most likely an imaginary figure.

I also happen to have received a similar version of another, earlier, 'alien Muslim' conquest of India in a village not far from my residence at JNU some three decades ago. Muhammad Ghūrī, we learn from all books of history, defeated Pṛthvirāj Chauhān in the Battle of Tarāī in 1191 and thus was founded the Delhi Sultanate, the beginning of 'Muslim' rule in India that was to last some six and half centuries. The villagers, however, had another take on it. Muhammad was a lad from a neighbouring village,

I was told, and was kidnapped by some raiders and taken away far from India; there he was converted to Islam. But as he grew up, he realised what had happened and thus came back and established his kingdom here. Once again, the 'alien' and the 'Muslim' character of this rule were absent from the story; it was as if Muhammad Ghūrī came back home to India and took what belonged to him. The stories do not care for 'evidence', chronology, logic, sequence or any of the paraphernalia of historians; yet they do give us a worldview of their own, which is quite at variance with the worldview that inheres in the history taught in the academy. This worldview needs understanding as a subject of study instead of being contemptuously dismissed as bazaar gossip or village tales. The plea I am making here is to seek to *understand* the tales as part of an encompassing culture; it is not a plea to accept them as 'history'. For these are a very important part of our cultural milieu.

Some segments of India's political leadership had grasped the significance of this milieu and had sought to make a perverse use of it in the events leading up to the demolition of the Bābarī Masjid on 6 December 1992 in Ayodhya. For months prior to the demolition, huge billboards in garish colours and bad Hindi were placed near the site for visitors' viewing. The billboards told the story of the building of the mosque by Bābur in folk-tale genre: after the demolition of the Rām temple, Bābur had erected his mosque on its site; but even as the walls were erected, the dome would not sit on top of these. After several attempts a Muslim astrologer diagnosed the problem and advised the emperor to soak the walls with the blood of a hundred thousand Hindus and the walls would accept the dome. This was done and the mosque was completed. The billboards carried the signature of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad to lend the story authenticity. All 'historical' evidence – texts, archaeology, architecture etc. – goes against the notion that a temple, much less a Rām temple, had existed at the site where the Bābarī Masjid had stood – of which, incidentally neither Bābur, nor any of his successors, nor any historian of medieval India was aware (Mukhia 2010, pp. 87–94). Yet, the issue has become a powerful presence in India's political scenario because it has been built upon popular versions of history.

There are different versions of mythology too. Raimundo Panikkar had long ago already traced links between the Brahmanical notion of Time derived from the Vedic texts and popular traditions. The notion of Absolute Time (*kālavāda*) is not only 'a very ancient concept ... but above all, it is a widely held popular view, belonging to the less Brahmanical stratum of Indian tradition' (Panikkar 1992, p. 23). Richard Lannoy too points to the tribal origins of the ideal of the cyclical four *yugas* in Indian mythology, beginning with the *ṛta yuga*: 'Hindu society was probably aware that the time sense of the surrounding tribal societies was even more consistently non-linear than their own' (Lannoy 1971, p. 288). But, these links apart, tribal society – it is hard to speak of it in the singular – develops its own sense of time and the world around it through its constantly evolving origin myths. Their time is not measurable in historical, empirical terms of decades, centuries and millennia; there is no over-arching logical consistency to their constructions; there is neither an affirmation, nor denial of history as we understand it. Yet, the outlines of a sense of the present and the past are discernible in their myths;

and as the myths grow, the sense of past and present also changes, usually recapturing their changing relationship with the caste society or with instruments of state power. In constructing their origin myths, which vary with each situation, they either visualise a continuous flow of time or one that is fractured, suggesting a new relationship with status and power (Bhattacharya, unpublished; Banerjee 2006).

These are some pointers to the many voids that draw us away from the unitary image of India inherited from Indology. India is far too diverse in every arena of study to fit into any single image of it. Yet, the singularity of India and its diversities do not constitute counterpositions. In the midst of all the multifaceted diversities, India as a singular entity also endures. It is only when we take into account both the mutually complementary and mutually reinforcing phenomena that a fuller picture of India can emerge. If we witness India as being acutely tense with internal divisions of religious community- and caste-identities, it is also important not to miss the scenario where every community and every caste is at the same time in political power and in opposition in its different states. India is an ensemble of enormous diversities, horizontal as well as vertical.

For this reason, among others, as also for reasons of the colonial baggage attached to 'Indology', it might serve us better to replace it with a more inclusive term like Indian studies.

REFERENCES

- Banerjee, Prathama, 2006, *Politics of Time: 'Primitives' and History-writing in a Colonial Society*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Bhattacharya, Neeladari, Mythic time and historical time. Unpublished paper.
- Gaur, Ishwar Dayal, 2008, *Martyr as Bridegroom. A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh*. Anthem South Asian Studies, New Delhi.
- Lanny, R., 1971, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society*. London.
- Manucci, N., 1981, *Storia do Mogor*. Eng. Tr. William Irvine. 4 vols., first pub. 1907, reprint, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, New Delhi; here vol. 1.
- Mukhia, Harbans, 1990, Indian folklore and peasant mentality. Paper submitted to Seminar on *Peasant Culture and Consciousness*. Bellagio (unpublished).
- Mukhia, Harbans, 2010, The Ramjanmabhoomi-Babari Masjid Dispute – the evidence of medieval sources. In the author's book *Exploring India's Medieval Centuries. Essays in History, Society, Culture and Technology*. Aakar Books, New Delhi, pp. 87–94.
- Panikkar, R., 1992, 'Time and history in the tradition of India: Kala and Karma'. In: *Time in Indian Philosophy*. Edited by Harishankar Prasad. Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, pp. 21–49.
- Rag, Pankaj, 2010, *1857: The Oral Tradition*. Rupa, New Delhi.
- Srinivasan, Ramya, 2004, The "Marriage" of "Hindu" and "Turak": Medieval Rajput Histories of Jalor. *The Medieval History Journal*, 7,1, pp. 87–108.
- Sreenivasan, Ramya, 2007, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen. Heroic Pasts in India: c. 1500–1900*. Permanent Black, Ranikhet.
- Teltscher, Kate, 1997, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600–1800*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.