

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TEACHING MODERN INDIAN HISTORY IN INDOLOGY**

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This paper points out the significance of studying modern Indian history within the broadest context of Indology and emphasises its practical use. From the methodological viewpoint there are at least two didactic approaches to the issue – the chronological one and the subject one. The paper considers the pros and cons of both approaches from the teacher's as well as the student's perspective. It suggests a periodisation of modern Indian history, underlining the characteristic feature of each period and subsequently making it easier to follow the process of political development in India since Independence. The golden thread of the fascinating story appears to be a permanent struggle for the preservation of unity, resisting centrifugal forces of various kinds which with fluctuating intensity threaten the political unity of India. This persistent struggle between unity and diversity might prove to be the very key to understanding modern Indian history.

This paper is dedicated to the presumed significance of studying different aspects of the development process, which the entire Indian society had to undergo after acquiring the independence in 1947. I have no ambitions to handle the problem in its complexity and intricately structured integrity. I rather attempt to present a report of a teacher who has just begun his teaching career and who has tried to explain the complicated social and political developments in India during its recent history to Czech students majoring in various Indian languages. I hope this kind of evaluation, and in a sense a self-critical report of the course in the History of Independent India, could be interesting and helpful even to the practised pedagogues experienced at both teaching and research. It is perhaps relevant that the following analysis comes from someone who until recently was on the other side of the teaching process and suddenly and very quickly had to manage a shift in his position and role. I am presenting my humble contribution with an eager and sincere wish to learn through critical feedback from more experienced colleagues regarding some potential pitfalls in the didactic method I have decided to follow, about its benefit and weakness, due to the fact that such a specialised course had never been taught at our Institute before, at least in that systematic form I have attempted.

The topic of the Prague Conference was the search for and discovery of what constitutes the content of Indological research in the broadest sense of the term (I lay aside the criticism of the very word "Indology", since it is being discussed elsewhere in the volume). Literally speaking, it was a search to know what the Indological identities are. However, I would like to broaden the definition of our topic by observations from its 'reverse side'. Surely no field of human knowledge is a dead study, existing for and by itself, without close association with the people co-creating its substance, carrying

it on, and very often transforming it radically due to circumstances and the impact of time. Therefore I believe if we look for the identity of any academic field, we have to pay appropriate attention to the professional profile of students and researchers themselves. In our context, we shall note what is or should be the identity of an Indologist, considering in turn of people dealing with Indian languages and those dealing with some aspects of Indian culture, literature and history.

From the perspective of Central Europe and its historical experience we have without any doubt been for some time at a stage entailing plenty of core changes, both practical and ideological. Those cardinal changes, being in progress right now before our eyes, will be very likely to have a certain impact on our perception of the term under examination and its content, “Indology”, its identity and therefore on the identity of an Indologist. In comparison with our teachers, the upcoming generation of Czech Indologists has the clear advantage of direct contact with Indian surroundings. In addition to profound knowledge of a particular Indian language or languages, nowadays it seems inevitable to be well informed about the political, social and religious state of affairs in contemporary India, to see the historical circumstances of present problems and to be aware of a variety of troubles tormenting today’s India. I am in no way diminishing the importance of the study of classical philology, classical literature and religion. These are still indispensable foundations of the subject. However, as in the case of China and sinology I presume our branch will see a growing number of students and applicants whose main interest in Indology will focus on the increasing political and economic significance of India in the contemporary world. That fact has much to do with the practical use of their knowledge and skills. I think it is good to consider that not all of our students aspire to become Indological scholars. Therefore within the limits of their professional preparation they should be offered a variety of intellectual tools for any other possible usage. Nowadays there are a few graduates of our Institute who have found their fulfilment at different levels of diplomatic service. Yet so far there have been no Czech journalists, publicists or reporters well informed about India and its surroundings, especially its politics. These missing professionals should provide the public with up-to-date information about Indian affairs. Therefore the chief objective of my course *History of Independent India* was to arouse students’ interest in contemporary India at a deep level. After all, who else should responsibly fill this apparent gap and give unbiased information about events in today’s India?

The course I have managed to carry out seems to be in many ways an innovation. Therefore during the process of its preparation I had to deal with many obstacles, some of them being apparent, others more hidden. The first issue I had to cope with was connected to the didactic approach to the topic, in other words how to narrate contemporary Indian history, the political development of India after 1947 in particular. If we look at the standard overview literature dealing with the topic, we get two separate didactic approaches towards the issue – the so-called subject one and the chronological one. As an example of the former I shall mention the classical work of P. Brass (1989), of the latter the bestseller by R. Guha (2007), somewhere in between lies the respected and highly used book by B. Chandra (1999).

The subject approach holds forth on every single sphere of the Indian state, one by one, separately. Its chief characteristic is precision in dealing with the component problems, for instance the development of political parties as one separate question. Another one could be changes in the Indian economy over the decades, and a further one the status of women in post-colonial society. I believe the disadvantage of the subject approach is evident. The development in a particular sphere is not always clearly connected with the development of India as a whole, as a logical unit; it is not seen in the broadest context of the political and social changes going on in Indian surroundings, even though there usually is some kind of causal relationship among these different changes.

On the other hand the chronological approach, as its name suggests, proceeds strictly chronologically, year by year or rather from one significant event to another, even if they are of a very different nature. The merit of this approach is a narrative because its main purpose is to narrate stories. Unfortunately, these stories tend to be webby, sometimes even chaotically entangled, and as such may produce some confusion in the mind of a not yet well-informed person. They rather gradually put the different pieces of a whole together, as a puzzle or a colourful mosaic, so the real meaning in its entirety does not appear until the end of the story. This second approach looks in accordance with the nature of reality itself, because it also seems to be the result of multiple causes and consequences, in our context literally through and across all different spheres of the life of the Indian state as well as its citizens. For example, it is meaningful to see the economic reforms of the first two plans from the 50s in logical connection with the position of India on the international stage at that time. In a similar way it is reasonable to understand the growth of communalism in the latter half of the 60s as a consequence of political instability after the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, as well as a reverberation of the second war with Pakistan in 1965.

The next problem I had to face during the preparation of my course was an attempt to set up a periodisation of the time examined. It had to be purposive in that it should make the political development in India apparent by separating specific phases characterised by distinctive features, even during this relatively short time. Therefore the proposed periodisation of Indian history after Independence could be the following: the first stage lasting from 1947 until the unexpected death of Shastri in 1966, the end of the second stage is marked by the destruction of Bābarī Masjid in Ayodhya at the close of 1992 while the last period started with the economic liberalisation of the Indian market and is continuing. If we look over these component periods, we see that every single period brought substantial changes in every single sphere of the life of the Indian state. Limited space does not allow me to mention all of them so again let me only give a few examples:

Firstly, the development of politics at the level of central government is evident. The initial stage is usually called the Nehru era with a very short continuation under Shastri – for it is typical strong and high-principled leadership fully devoted to democracy even in spite of the sporadic troubles this devotion might have brought. The second stage could be called the Indira and Rajiv era with a very brief interlude of fragile coalition government after the termination of Emergency. It is characterised by growing populism

in Indian politics in general as well as by huge empowerment of the prime minister's office and utter concentration of political power into one pair of hands. This stage also meant the fundamental test of Indian democracy and its principles. And the last stage seems so far to be characterised by a definitive shift from one dominant party in power to many-headed coalitions, while the idea of democracy itself appears to be well and securely established in India, despite plentiful inconveniences emerging from a multicultural society with different groups having diverse concerns.

The relationship between the centre and regions went through a similar change. The importance of regional political parties grew rapidly from the beginning of the second stage, but later on the weakened all-India national parties started to play their own crucial part again, nowadays very often turning the scales to the advantage of one regional party over another.

On the economic level we could label these three stages very briefly as being of hope, stagnation and reforms, the latter with internal as well as global consequences not yet fully known.

Also the relationships among different religious communities have passed through a stormy period of development, we could say from relative peace in the first stage through massive and very often bloody riots during the second stage, when the antagonistic interests of different religious groups became inseparably part of mass political agitation. At present this type of religious rhetoric usually does not help much in the political struggle. However, from time to time we still witness occasional religious riots with hidden political meaning, as for example in the case of Gujarat in 2002 or Orissa in 2008.

And finally, changes are also evident at the level of foreign policy, so at the time of the non-alignment movement in the 50s we can observe the assertive and sincere efforts of India to act as a neutral country. The failure of that movement and its toothlessness brought India closer to the socialist block and further on, at the present stage, old divisions of the world have been disbanded and at last India is one of the most crucial players in global politics.

During all these three stages independent India has not only had to deal with the British colonial heritage, but above all with some fundamental features related to its society, economy and culture. I have the courage to call them altogether the attributes of India. They spring from the richness of Indian history and radically, sometimes fatally, determine the development of India as a whole. Let's look at them closely now.

Figuratively speaking, it is possible to imagine Independent India as a ring symbolizing its unity. Most of the ring is formed by at least four different attributes, from time to time threatening to split the ring and destroy its unity. Due to the fact that India is a democracy with freedom of expression, all conflicts induced by the requirements of those attributes are inevitably more evident, wholly exposed to the sight of the public and subsequently subject to a harsh critique, unlike for example in communist China with the secrecy of its totalitarian regime. As I have already said these attributes immediately spring from India, from its complex historical, religious and cultural development. All these attributes result from a remarkable diversity, omnipresent in

India for centuries but expressing itself with full power only after Independence. As a matter of fact, shortly before 1947 very few foreigners were confident that India would remain united – seasoned politicians from the West, social scientists, economists, administrative officials and British officers in the long term working in India, all of them predicted the quick disintegration of the country into the countless tiny or larger states, and subsequently endless decades of dreadful civil wars engulfing the whole Subcontinent. Unprecedented and rampant violence in the Punjab after the Partition was viewed by them as a prelude to the unavoidable and a confirmation of their predictions. In short, those attributes of India seemed to be too diverse to allow for the mere existence of one state.

In this sense let's place on the edges of our ring: language, religion, classes or castes and poverty, or we had better to say economic inequality. All these inner Indian attributes are de facto centrifugal forces fighting against Indian unity, while at the same time they form its unique richness of different expressions at the levels of culture, religion, language etc. The very famous statement of unity in diversity is an obvious cliché but aptly describes the permanent tensions in Indian society. The diversity seems to be the result of centrifugal forces acting at the same time, sometimes in collaboration, sometimes independently, but all the time posing a serious threat to unity.

From this point of view I tried to narrate to our students the fascinating story of Independent India and to explain why and how India today and especially Indian politics tries hard to resist those forces and keep its unity. In fact it is a golden thread of modern Indian history and if one follows it with proper attention it takes one through the labyrinth safely and ultimately rewards one with a better understanding.

I would like to conclude this paper by paraphrasing the title of a famous book by A. L. Basham (1956, first published 1954) expressing his admiration for ancient India. But I believe the same admiration can be applied to India of today. Regardless of the 60 years of struggle it is, after all, still one strongly united and democratic country, with all the pros and cons of democracy, and this is a true wonder, let's say the wonder that IS India.

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