

Goa: Educational Institutions Through the Ages

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Perspectives on Teaching of Indian History

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In recent years teaching of Indian History has become increasingly difficult and more challenging. It is not due to the paucity of published works or reading materials. It is because of the availability of rich and varied writings on history which include both 'good' and 'poor quality' histories. It is also because of the fact that there is an important connection between the writing (i.e. historiography) and teaching of history. A teacher of Indian history will have to continuously study and understand the rich historiography in India which has been growing both quantitatively and qualitatively. There has been considerable development in the art of writing history. The successive stages in this art have been different, without necessarily meaning that every stage in that process was an improvement on the previous. It would be unfair to assert that any historical approach is inherently better than the other, some are more useful or suggestive at a given time. Each school has its own merits and demerits. Each school should be approached and studied against the context in which it came into being. The time factor in history becomes relevant here. For example, in Homeric times history was influenced by the epic tradition and historical writings in the middle ages were influenced by religious faith. Anyone teaching Indian National Movement should not only be aware of the basic and traditional historical details but also the different schools or varieties of writings such as Colonialist (James Mill)¹, Nationalist (K.P. Jayaswal)², Marxist (R.P. Dutt)³, Cambridge (John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal)⁴ and Subaltern (Ranjit Guha)⁵. Thus the existence of varied literature

necessitates more reading, comprehension, analysis, willingness to receive different theories and ideas, synthesis, lively and lucid expression on the part of the teachers of history.

Historiography through the ages has been contributing to the explosion of historical knowledge. It has resulted in the discarding of traditional approaches to history and replacement of traditional notions about it. It has resulted in disregard for myths, disbeliefs in 'golden age', discontinuation of hero worship, absence of stereotypes and so on. The canvas of history as a subject for study widened considerably. New areas such as studies on tribes, peasants, workers, students, women, movements of mobilization among these sections of the society, social structure, material basis of social formations, levels of technology, urbanisation, regional - local history, regional and class variations in a movement (e.g. Quit India Movement), etc. have been emerging. 'History from below' or 'History of the historyless' is gaining prominence. In this connection, the best example could be Sumit Sarkar's **Modern India 1885-1947**⁶, a novel and model work. All these developments require serious attention from the teachers of history. An ideal teacher should be receptive in nature. But even minor changes in the syllabi and inclusion of recent interpretations are not easily welcomed by the teachers.

The ideas put forth by the Orientalists or Indologists about the idealised culture of Indian antiquity and that it was an idyllic society⁷, the idea of James Mill that Indian society was static or there existed changelessness in Indian society (or the idea of Oriental Despotism)⁸ and the idea (originally, subsequently changed) of Karl Marx that there was the absence of private property in India during

the pre-British period⁹ have been rejected by the Indian historians. The concept of the 'golden age' (eg. Golden Age of the Guptas) and the idea of 'hero worship' (eg. Ashoka the Great, Samudra Gupta the Great, Alexander the Great, Akbar the Great and so on) have been consigned to the past. Romila Thapar writes : "the 'Golden Age' of the Guptas represents a series of paradoxes. It is described as a period of Hindu renaissance. The main artistic achievements were Buddhist (sculpture and painting) and were associated with the monasteries. The scientific achievements were partly indigenous and partly cosmopolitan as represented in the earlier tradition of Charaka and Sushruta of Aryabhatta and the somewhat later tradition of Varahamihira. In spite of the emphasis on non-violence as essential to the best Hindu tradition, the glorification of Samudragupta is largely based on his prowess as a military conqueror. The major evidence therefore for a Hindu renaissance lies in the writings of Kalidasa, the composition of the early Puranas and the coins and inscriptions of the Gupta Kings which would suggest that they were patrons of Hindu sects. Is the Hindu renaissance as it was, therefore an essential part of the golden age?"¹⁰ About the concept of 'golden age', D.D. Kosambi, the mathematician turned historian wrote: "There was no original golden age of mankind outside the imagination of later poets and priests. 'The golden age' if any, lies in the future, not in the past."¹¹ The glory and grandeur of a period were enjoyed by the rulers and other elites. If one looks at the total history of any period, there was no 'golden age'. According to D.D. Kosambi, "in history, it is more important to know whether a given people had the plough or not than to know the name of their king, then India has a history"¹². To Kosambi, "history is the presentation in chronological order of successive changes in the means and relations of production"¹³.

Thomas Carlyle's view that history is nothing but the biography of great men has become obsolete and unacceptable today. The great heroes of early Indian history - Chandragupta Maurya, Kaniska, Samudragupta, Harsha, Rajendra Chola and others are heroes primarily because they were conquerors. Year after year, thousands of students and teachers of history proclaim Samudragupta as the Indian Napoleon (after Vincent A. Smith) and glory in his actions in uprooting kings and tribal chiefs in victory after victory¹⁴.

For an improved, objective, scientific and meaningful teaching of history, the result of historiography, i.e. the new histories and interpretations, should be included in teaching. This forces the teacher to be a student also forever. Romila Thapar writes : "The vast majority of practitioners in the field of historical teaching accept communal or near communal assumptions as historical truths. They refrain from applying any criteria of objective analysis to ascertain afresh the veracity of these assumptions as truths. This is partly because the discipline of history is rarely emphasised in the teaching of history in most universities in India. History remains a continuous narrative of preselected events, where neither the basis for the selection of those particular events is examined, nor their relevance. Students of history therefore are trained to receive a certain body of information which they generally commit to memory and which they then go on repeating *ad infinitum* when they in turn become teachers of history or when they attempt writing history. Another reason for this highly unsatisfactory situation is that the result of recent research in a particular field of history is rarely incorporated into the standard works and text books. Thus in most schools, colleges and universities the student of history is still learning the subject, both in content

and in technique, as it was taught one generation (if not two) ago"¹⁵. The need of the hour is that the new findings and explanations in history should be incorporated in the text books at all levels of teaching. Besides constant revisions in syllabi are also required.

It is often forgotten that historical interpretation can be the product of a contemporary ideology¹⁶. This was particularly so for theories put forward by historians until very recent years when history was (as it continues to be in many cases) a narrative of events without much attempt at analysis. The choice of events was conditioned by the historian's predilections and it is in the nature of the choice that the historian's subjectivity can be seen. The interpretation is also influenced by the priority which a historian gives to his sources and the degree to which he is willing to be critical and analytical about his sources¹⁷. According to Romila Thapar, "In his (historian's) handling of the evidence from the past, he is often influenced by his own contemporary setting"¹⁸. This leads us to subjectivity in history. Subjectivity results in the distortion of historical facts and it is dangerous too. Subjectivity and exaggeration could be seen at their best in K.P. Jayaswal's ***Hindu Rolicy***. Nationalism and communalism are two modern phenomena in Indian history. But nationalist historians like K.P. Jayaswal and R.K. Mookherjee could see nationalism in ancient India. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, V.D. Savarkar and others could find communalism in the early period of Indian history also. The historian as well as the teacher should try to overcome subjectivity though cent percent objectivity is difficult to achieve.

Another problem is that of communalism in history. For example, James Mill's ***History of British India*** (3 Vols.) laid the foundation for a communal interpretation of

Indian history. He was the first historian to develop the thesis of dividing Indian history into three periods which he called Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization and British civilization (not Christian civilization!). Mill's was the first recognised history of India and it made such an impact that its assumptions are still accepted in some circles. Now the legitimacy of the use of the terms "Hindu period" and "Muslim period" is being questioned¹⁹.

Both the historian and the teacher should have a consistent approach to the subject. Mahmud of Ghazni is primarily associated in most standard histories as the despoiler of temples and the breaker of idols. The explanation for this activity is that he was a Muslim. Thus the assumption being that only a Muslim would despoil temples and break idols. The history books never highlight the case of Harsha, a 11th century King of Kashmir for whom the despoiling of temples was an organised, institutionalised activity. Harsha appointed an officer called *devotpatananayaka*. Here clearly the explanation cannot be that he was a religious iconoclast but that he plundered temples for their wealth which he used for other purposes. Writing on medieval Indian history and the communal approach, Harbans Mukhia says; "There is no evidence, indeed, to suggest that the state engaged itself in converting the Hindus into Muslims on a mass level or in a ferment, zealous effort to propagate the faith"²⁰. Further Mukhia writes: "One could perhaps also argue that the *jizia* was a compulsion on the Hindus to become Muslims. For one thing, however, that by becoming Muslims they would then have to pay the *zakat* which was a tax exclusively levied on the Muslims"²¹. Similarly, the communal approach towards Tipu Sultan's religious policy, the foundation of the Vijayanagara empire and so on are also unacceptable. Thus, our approach to history can be genuinely

and logically secular only when we change our whole approach towards history itself and study the history of the society rather than that of an individual ruler or the ruling class²². These examples of communal history do not arise out of a desire to merely criticise the communal approach. Firstly, the communal interpretation of history is poor quality history. The second factor pertains to the contemporary situation. Historians and teachers of history cannot allow the discipline of history to degenerate to the extent that false history becomes instrumental in the promotion of political mythology. Since historians and history teachers can, consciously or unconsciously, become the intellectual progenitors of political beliefs, the analysis of history thereby becomes particularly crucial to political ideologies. If the communal ideology is to be uprooted, our educational system, the political parties and the mass media should stop propagating this illogical and unhistorical view and stress the historical development of Indian culture through various ages and through various streams²³.

According to Bipan Chandra, "We live in cliches so far as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekanand, Lokmanya Tilak, Gandhiji and others are concerned. It has become a tradition with our mass media, school text books, All India Radio, etc. to uncritically praise them. We never tell the people, specially the young, that these great men, being men, had imperfect understanding and also imperfect actions"²⁴. It is particularly important that our text books, the newspapers, the All India Radio, and the political leadership must stop being all things to all men, thus even indirectly strengthening the forces of national disintegration"²⁵.

Historical method and historiography have developed considerably in recent years. They were recent additions to the curriculum of history in most of the Universities in India. A history teacher without proper knowledge of these subjects will be terribly handicapped today. The methodology of research, preliminary, analytical, synthetic operations and expositions should be known to the teacher. The classification of sources, sifting of evidences, the art and science of Heuristics (author, place and time) and Hermeneutics (good faith and accuracy), the questions of objectivity and subjectivity, the philosophy and discipline of history, causation, etc. should be studied by the teacher. The scientific qualities and techniques involved in historical research and the artistic tastes required in the writing of history are equally significant. All these exercises require great skill and deep analysis. Leopold Von Ranke, the German Positivist, wanted to apprehend historical phenomena as they actually were or "as what actually happened". Ranke's definition shows that history as a subject is based on the solid foundation of facts. To J. B. Bury history is "Science no less and no more". In fact, the objective, methodological and theoretical understanding of history requires scientific qualities. To a convict in Italy when a choice was given between hard labour in jail and the study of Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, it is said that he preferred to go to jail. The job of a historian and also of a history teacher is to make the explanation artistic and interesting. Literary craftsmanship is a valuable aid in the writing and teaching of history²⁶. Wit and humour are the spice of literature, as of life and history (e.g. Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, T. B. Maculay's *History of England* and so on).

The teaching of history should be followed by practicals. H. D. Sankalia said that Fr. Henry Heras never believed in 'arm-chair' or 'table archaeology'. Now there cannot be 'arm chair' teaching of history. Preparation of maps, identification of places, visits to libraries, archives and historical sites, use of audio-visual aids, computers, e-mail, fax and other advanced scientific and technological facilities are to be used. With the modern facilities, it is easier to collect materials for preparation. Cliometrics or quantified history²⁷ is becoming increasingly popular and useful. This is more so with the historians and teachers dealing with economic history. The best example for quantified history could be the combined work of Noboru Karashima, Y. Subbarayalu and Toru Matsui entitled ***A Concordance of the Names in the Cola Inscriptions***²⁸. The work of these scholars have a greater claim to endurance for they are based on the hard rock of empirical data and not the quicksands of speculation²⁹.

The teaching of history should emphasise the study of comparative languages (Philology) and also inter-disciplinary approach. Pioneers in the fields of philology and inter-disciplinary approach were Sir William Jones and D.D. Kesambi respectively. A history teacher should equip himself with the knowledge of allied subjects such as literature, political science, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, economics and other ancilliary disciplines. For example, teaching the subject of Portuguese colonialism in Goa along with Portuguese language will make the teaching and study more meaningful and beneficial. However, the necessity of language will vary depending upon the topic or subject of teaching.

The teaching of history should be more related to life and society and more pragmatic in terms of the future

of the students as also the nation. Practical oriented teaching must exist. For example, one paper should be introduced to prepare the students for facing the I.A.S., NET, SET and other competitive examinations.

The biases and prejudices, the communal interpretations and unscientific and poor quality history should not be taught at all and particularly to young minds. Further one should not suffer from "Fraude's Disease".

Objective and serious teaching of history will help at least to some extent to overcome serious problems like communalism, regionalism, linguistic chauvinism and such other divisive tendencies. Study of history must help students to develop a broader approach to life, to become better citizens. Local and regional histories should be taught in the broader pan-Indian perspective that is necessary for unity in diversity³⁰. (For example national perspective while teaching the history of Goa).

E. H. Carr's answer to the question "What is History?" is that "It is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past"³¹. Interaction and dialogue make history interesting, lively and evergrowing and never ending.

The general notion about history as an easy, boring and dry subject consisting of stories of the past kings, battles, dates and so on has been changing. It needs to be changed further and removed completely. The popular understanding that history is a subject for the least intelligent student is wrong and this can be partly rectified by the teachers of history through their teaching.

The generally poor opinion about history is borne out of (1) a situation in which serious objective researches were not conducted, (2) insufficient knowledge about the subject or half-baked knowledge about the subject or half-baked ideas about it and (3) lack of seriousness and commitment among teachers (imagine a history teacher saying in the class that history is a dry, boring subject !). The definition of Henry Ford that "history is bunk" is unacceptable. Whenever Frederick 'the Great' felt like reading a history work, he would order, "bring me my liar". All these wrong notions about history should be given up completely.

Another important task to be accomplished is to make history a serious and lively subject of study. It is to be undertaken on an urgent basis. That is the translation of standard books on Indian history into the various regional languages. The results of the researches of great scholars should reach students of history and the public in different parts of the country. English language is still a barrier and not an easy vehicle for communication to a large section of society in the dissemination of knowledge.

In the 1980s, in Tamil Nadu, the then Education Minister considered history as a useless subject and thought of scrapping history as a subject of study from the educational institutions! Such is the tragedy of our subject, Clio the Muse. This should never happen. History should be taught well at all levels of education. History should thrive as a popular and useful subject and should command respect.

For all these, a wholesale change in the educational system and in the teaching of history from the primary school to post-graduate level is required. An

aptitude for doing better and teaching more efficiently is a must. Changes in syllabi and preparation of standard text books are required. There must be concern and longing for the subject. The aim should be to teach standard history and impart quality education.

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